The MASTER of the HOUSE

EDGAR JAMES
EDWARD MARSHALL

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SHE THREW HER HEAD BACK SCORNFULLY. "YOU HUMILIATE ME BEFORE EVERY ONE!". *Frontispiece p.* 316

THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE

A Story of Modern American Life

ADAPTED FROM THE PLAY OF
EDGAR JAMES
BY
EDWARD MARSHALL

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM
SCENES IN THE PLAY

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ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

She threw her head back scornfully. "You humiliate me before every one!" . . . . . *Frontispiece* 316

"Mrs. Hoffman, let me tell you now, this minute, I won't take any orders from that—person." 110

"You've drawn the strings into a hard knot." 150

Hoffman saw with indignation and surprise. 156

"No one shall take you from me!" 218

"You don't understand me and you have never understood me!" 226

"Husbands never want to hear the truth." 237

"I've *done* with you. . . . Go!" 333

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The Master of the House

CHAPTER I

THE slim girl stood on the model's platform, looking angrily at the gray-whiskered, stolid painter who observed her without much approval.

"Bettina," he said, almost angrily, "you're *trying* to be knock-kneed. For God's sake treat the legs He gave you with respect. Suppose they stayed bent!"

"I hate it!" was her answer, evidently meaning that she disliked posing.

"Then why don't you quit it? I'm using you only for your own sake. I don't want to see you hungry. I'd much rather have a blonde nymph—please be sure of that!"

She looked at him with hot wrath in her eyes.

"I mustn't wink, I mustn't yawn, I mustn't stretch a leg——"

"Not when you know that at that very moment I am studying that leg," he ventured. "You do it to annoy me."

"Do you think I am not human, eh? Do you think I'm made of wood?" Bettina had a temper, plainly, which was not made of anything like wood.

He let the hand which held his palette drop helplessly before him, and his maul-stick clattered to the

"I suppose I'll have to let you keep on posing for me. If I don't, why, you'll be posing for some of the young fellows, and then God knows what will happen."

"You're a mere beast. I'll never pose for you again." She swept her scornful eyes about the studio. "Dirt, and poverty, and temper!" she exclaimed. "Give me my money!"

"What will your mother say to you?" he faltered. Evidently he regretted his impetuous decision to have done with her and, as evidently, he regretted it far more on her account than on his own. "She'll be angry and blame you."

"Beast!"

He slipped the money back into his pocket. "You'd better come again to-morrow, but try not to break the pose when you know I'm working nicely."

"Give me my money. I'll not come again. Mother may say exactly what she pleases. Anyway, she sends half the money I make to Arthur. He doesn't have to work."

"The damned young gambling rascal!" The old man's soft, big heart was touched. "Poor child!" said he, his anger gone.

"Don't 'poor child' me; give my money to me."

"No, come again to-morrow. I'll try to stand it."

"Give me my money."

"No; I won't." He shook his head.

For a moment she looked at him with bent head and flashing eyes, even angrier than she had been. "You won't? I think you will! Haven't I earned it?

Well, I'll have it! If you don't give it to me I think I know some one who will come and get it for me. I think I know some one."

He laughed, but she had roused his wrath again. "You mean that crazy young pianist? Send him here. I've had no lunch. I'd like to—eat him up!"

"You'd not eat Theodore! Theodore Sevigny's not the kind to let an old, gray-whiskered artist eat him up—an old, gray-whiskered artist with egg upon his shirt-front, who tries to beat a model out of her two dollars!"

Two details of this speech distressed the painter: one was the implication that he possibly could stoop to cheating a poor model, and the other was the statement that egg spots were upon his shirt-front. When he looked down, in affright, and actually saw yellow stains, he was undone. Without another word he passed the crumpled bank-note to her.

"My God! I'll never eat another egg!"

"And I hope you'll never try to cheat another girl!"

"Bettina!"

"Call me 'Miss Curtis.' Don't you dare to——"

She had gone across the wide old room and passed behind a second screen—handsome, if even shabbier than its fellow behind which she had dressed. It was angled at the door to hide the room's interior from such as, knocking upon business, might otherwise have looked in when the door was opened.

"The door is locked!"

The artist laughed. "Come back and sit down, then, till the hour that you've been paid for is quite

up . . . Quite . . . up . . . It will give your temper time to cool; and, anyway, I want to have a talk with you."

She shook the door with vicious wrath.

"It's locked—and strong," he counseled.

"Beast! Come here! Unlock it!"

"I'm not going to. I'm smoking." He sank into a chair and lit his pipe. "You'll have to stay. You might as well come back here and sit down."

After more futile shaking at the door and ten minutes on her feet, she did as he suggested, for she really was tired. But she did not look at him, or speak to him.

She made a very charming picture as she flung herself into the shabby rocker which he had swung into position for her. Her wrath had doubled, but she was dumb through consciousness of helplessness. She was a little bit dismayed at thought of going to her mother and explaining that this work had been rejected for the future. She did not wish to pose for other artists; there was some reserve about her.

Canny beyond her years, through the precarious life provided for her by a stepfather who loved his liquor far more than his adopted family, and a mother who had driven him to this unnatural division of affection by the sharpness of her tongue and an extraordinary greed for bizarre self-adornment, the girl already had begun to definitely regret the outburst of her temper which might mean a break with the old artist—who had been a most important source of income to them all. Her brother either could not earn

or would not earn—the former being his contention and their mother's plea, while the latter was Bettina's firm conviction. Money had to be discovered, somehow, with which to furnish his supplies, for until they were secured her mother would use money for no other purpose—not even for household necessities. Her claim was that the youth was most unfortunate, that he continually met disastrous luck through no fault of his own, that the whole world, including the "old man" and Bettina, was strong against him. If one called attention to his manifold shortcomings, such as a tendency to bet upon the races, gamble elsewise, spend upon boon companions money which should have been devoted to the family or his own board bills, she made excuses for him. That he was young was her invariable plea when he did something worthy of a criminal centenarian.

And Bettina knew that she herself did not actually hate him, as she ought to.

From her earliest remembrance the family life had been a battle for her mother's favor, between her stepfather, on one side, and her brother and herself upon the other. Had it not been for their coalition against the "old man," she might have hated Arthur. Sometimes she hated him, in spite of it, but the hatred faded when their stepfather tried to punish him, or even hamper him in the realization of some of his extravagant desires, although, before the "old man's" wrath arose she might have fumed with indignation because Arthur's waste was curtailing her own spending.

As things stood, therefore, the daughter, mother and son comprised a little human triangle surrounded by a hostile world, and surrounding one poor wretch, her stepfather. The triangle combined against them both, determined to beat off the world and victimize it, when that was possible, and equally resolved to keep the old man in. While it kept him in it was an easy thing to victimize him to a degree—a small degree, for his income was small. If he escaped for a few days—sometimes he got away for a full month, to lie in sodden liberty at a distance, or in hiding—indignation became general. But the family always rescued, while it cursed him.

It was characteristic both of Bettina and her mother that they had a sense of loyalty toward him, as well as toward Arthur and each other, ready to be flaunted in the public gaze, but showing shabbily, or being utterly invisible when they were by themselves. Many were the battles waged in their own privacy; even fearsome were the tales they told to one another about one another; but when it came to real attack on any one of them from the outside then would they rise, cohesive and repellent as the Three Guardsmen, to combat the world—only, when the fight was over, to express with sizzling emphasis, not free from fierce invective from the four male lips among them, their violent opinions of each other.

Bettina, as she watched Murfree smoke, considered all these things—indefinitely, scarcely conscious that she analyzed them. She knew that should the artist try to harm her—insult her, or abuse her, or reduce

her wages—she would have the massed backing of her family against him, and that if they could not actually do him harm they would hate him till their dying days; she also knew that if she left him, as she threatened to, when all the fault was hers, and robbed the family coffers of the money which he offered her for posing, she would not readily be forgiven the sin.

The finances of the family always were at ebb; just now they were at lower ebb than usual; it would be an especially bad time to stop the flow of even the small stream with which her work was feeding them. Her wrath at Murfree was not lessened; her wrath at those at home became intense; but she decided not to throw away the source of income. She had not the courage, now that she had stopped to think it over.

Murfree never smoked when he was painting, it being his contention that the floating vapor round his easel might affect his color-judgment.

"Well," she snapped, "you going to sit and puff all day? Or are you going to work again?"

"You've decided to pose decently, have you?"

"Oh, yes; I'll pose. I've got to pose. I'm in your power enough for that. I suppose it's possible to hate you just as much when I'm here posing as it would be if I went outside to do it."

"Little cat!"

"Beast!"

Murfree burst into a roar of laughter.

"Well, Bettina," he said genially—so genially that she felt the muscles of her own face softening—"perhaps we'd better quit our scrapping and go on about

our business. Hurry up, get off your duds, and take the pose."

All the time she was behind the screen undressing she railed at him in her heart, but suddenly she had learned a mighty lesson. She had learned that there were other ways to manage men than to abuse them and desert them. She decided, then and there, that, no matter how she might hate Murfree, she would use him; she would manage him and use him. So, although it wrenched her lips to do it, she was smiling when she stepped up to the model's stand and took her pose.

"For Heaven's sake!" said the astonished Murfree. "Got your smiles back?"

"I've decided to be nice," Bettina answered.

Murfree looked at her with opened mouth. Here was a new phase of the girl. "You've decided to be nice—to *me?*"

"Yes, Mr. Murfree."

He raised his eyes dramatically. "This must be a dream!" Then to her: "Great God, child! Why?"

"I'll get the pose first, then we'll talk, if you're still working on the legs. Are you?"

"Yes; I'll work on anything you say. I'm dazed."

"Well—am I right, now?"

"Turn your back a little. Right knee up a trifle, please . . . There—that's it, exactly."

"Well, I don't like to pose; but I guess the way to stop it isn't just to quit."

" 'The way to stop it isn't just to quit?' It sounds unintelligent. Just what is the idea?"

"I mean that, maybe, if I'm more careful and really try to help you, perhaps you'll try to help me, Murfree."

Now he let both maul-stick and palette fall.

"Bettina, I am down and out! Is it possible that you are planning to control old Murfree through sweet words of kindness? You?"

"I'm not planning to control you. It had just occurred to me, that's all, that if I want you to do favors for me, I had best do favors for you, Murfree."

She broke the pose and turned toward him, with an appealing gesture, singularly irresistible. She looked very slim and childish; that she was posing for a nymph did not seem shocking to him—he had painted nymphs, from one model or another, for the better part of forty years; he saw no allurement, but merely lines and color values in the frank exposure.

"I'll be glad to help you, if I can," he said soberly, quite as if the conversation was in progress in the common-place surroundings and conventional costumes of a flathouse sitting-room.

"Really?"

"Sure, Betty."

"Then—you know a lot of people. Lots of people buy your pictures. They must be prosperous, or they couldn't buy them, for you know you get good prices, Murfree."

"The deuce I do! Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't—but go on, please."

"Isn't there some work that I could do, for some of them, that wouldn't be—like this? Don't they

sometimes need—oh, governesses for their children? Companions for their wives, to read aloud, and so on? I've read about such positions. I could be a governess —if they didn't ask too much."

"You'd choke the kids to death and throw them off the roof the first time they bothered you," Murfree predicted, gloomily.

"Not if I had the—job—and wished to keep it," she replied. "I've got quite a hold upon myself. See how I've pulled myself together, now! I was very angry, Murfree."

"When you get a hold upon yourself you'll really be dangerous," he said, with shaking head.

"I'd be less dangerous to little children, wouldn't I?"

"To little children, possibly, but—Lord!—to adults —women. You would poison them, I think, if they once crossed you."

"No, I wouldn't. My temper flares and dies away. I don't hate."

"But you don't *care* for folks. You can't. Not in you."

"I care for my mother and my brother."

"That's mere habit, not affection."

"Why, Murfree, I even care for you. Wait, I'm going to get that egg off."

"Glad to have you get the egg off, but you'll never care for me, or, really, for anyone. Sometime you'll think you are in love, but you won't be. It will flare and pass. You'll pretend you are a hundred times. Then will be when you will raise most—hob!"

She was working with a palette knife at the coagu-

lated egg. He knew it was a bribe, rather than a service, although she looked at him, with big eyes, very prettily, so he desisted.

"I do care for you, and I care very much for my dear family. And little children? I adore them!"

"I know a good sight better."

"You're wrong. I wouldn't poison them—I'd manage them."

He shook his head, emphatically doubtful; then he took thought of existing things, and began to wonder at them; wondering at them, he began to also wonder if she might not, even then, be proving her ability to manage them. This thought he voiced, ere long.

"You're managing me, this minute, aren't you?"

"I hope so."

There was a new appeal in the girl's eyes. He doubted it, and yet believed it. Could it be possible, he asked himself, that he was witnessing a human metamorphosis? Was the "little cat," whom he had known so long, maturing, there before his eyes, into a charming, reasonable woman? He had hoped she might, some day, but, lately, had begun to doubt the possibility.

"Well, you are," he granted. "Now, exactly what do you wish me to do for you?"

"Keep a lookout for a place for me. You know what I mean. I couldn't be—a servant—not exactly that."

"You might try clerking it. I could probably get you a job in some art store. You know something about pictures."

"No; no use of tempting providence, Murfree. I

couldn't stand it. Even the control I've got upon my temper, now, wouldn't endure the strain of talking art to that sort which goes into picture stores to buy."

He nodded with approval. The girl had brains. There was no doubt of that.

"Well, you know music. I might help you with——"

He stopped short, suddenly.

"With whom?" she eagerly inquired.

"No; music would be a bad life for you," he said slowly.

He was thinking of that Theodore Sevigny, of whom he had expressed such deep contempt, the abominable young pianist who had daily come to get her at the studio, until the artist had informed him that next time he climbed the stairs he, personally, would throw him bodily down them. Like others of high art's pursuers, he believed that those who sought her in another guise than that which he found so alluring must invariably be fools or charlatans. Sevigny, being musical, was, therefore, both unreliable and dangerous. He put away from him the thought which for a moment had flashed through his brain of finding her a place with an impresario friend, who needed someone in his office, to receive visitors.

"I just happened to remember that the chap whom I was thinking of is dead," he lied. "I wouldn't know exactly how to reach him with a letter introducing you."

She dimpled to the joke. "I wouldn't care to take the place, I'm sure, even if you could get it for me.

I never liked the heat. But don't you know somebody who is still on earth, and who might be as likely to—like me?"

He laughed. "You're showing me a brand new side, Bettina. And I thought I knew all of your phases."

"You're seeing more of them, this minute, than any other living soul except my mother ever saw. But can't you think of someone who would like the sober side? The helpful, busy side? I'm sure there's one, and I should like to use it." She had a sense of triumph. She was managing him. She knew, too, that she was doing a neat bit of acting.

"I wonder if there isn't!" he exclaimed. "Well, I'll tell you what. You take the pose again, while I fix up that thigh a little, and as I work I'll think."

Almost she advised him not to risk a strain so unaccustomed; but with new self-control she curbed her tongue.

He worked rapidly and with few words until the light failed.

"I haven't got it, yet," he told her, while she was behind the screen, above which, as she dressed, there now and then were flutters of swung garments. "But I'll find someone. If you're really in earnest about this—you are, aren't you?"

It may have been pins in her mouth which made her answer somewhat indistinct. He thought it was. It may have been a tendency toward scornful laughter—for Bettina certainly was advancing in the wisdom of this world by leaps and bounds, that after-

noon. "Why, certainly," she said, at any rate. "Of course I am, Murfree."

"Well, you bet I'll help you, then."

She came from behind the screen, gowned shabbily, wrapped in an old cloak which she wore jauntily, crowned by a wide hat which drooped with picturesque effect, although a better light would have revealed some gaps in its old feather's edging.

"And you'll forgive me, Murfree, for calling you a beast to-day?" Again that sweet, appealing look of upturned, wistful eyes—exceedingly large eyes—dramatic eyes.

"For heaven's sake, Bettina!" He was utterly dumfounded. "What a change of heart! Why, little girl, of course I have forgiven you, and I will help you!"

She smiled very sweetly, longing, mightily, to laugh instead. "It's nicer not to quarrel with people, isn't it?" said she. "To-day has taught me a great lesson, Murfree. I never thought it out before. You're not a beast, at all, except when I make you angry. And I made you angry quite intentionally. So it has been my fault you have been a beast at all."

There was something almost fervent in the hand which Murfree laid upon her shoulder. "My child, I'll never be a beast with you again. It has been my fault, not yours. My fault."

"No, mine—and I'm so sorry!" she called back to him as she left.

Long after her departure the bewildered artist sat in the growing dusk, endeavoring to adjust himself

to this new girl. She had, for years, amused him; he had loved to fight with her; it had been a real divertissement in a somewhat colorless existence. He had used her, sometimes, not because he liked her flesh-tints for a certain picture, and when a more mature figure would have been much better for the work in hand, but because it so amused him to observe her as she stuck her claws out, to listen to her, as she hissed and sputtered. He had never had much comfort from her purring. It had been far too infrequent.

Contrition swept him. He felt that his had been a vicious life. He had not done much harm, but had he done much good? Was not this to be his opportunity to benefit that world which he had hitherto regarded merely as a thing to battle with, or scorn, or laugh at—and exact a living from? He supposed all men should feel *some* sense of duty . . . obligation.

As he considered things in this new light, which so revealed the error of his own past ways, he saw a new Bettina, rising, as it were, out of the fresh paint (flesh tint) of the tempting and alluring nymph which beckoned to him from his easel. Had he done ill by her in letting her thus pose for him? He could not think so, for the posing had begun when she had been a baby girl, and had always been a very serious affair, frequently the cause of fights, never the cause of anything more tender than cold business, or wild verbal brickbats thrown through the studio with such extraordinary plenitude and energy that had they been

material the skylight would a thousand times have lain in shattered bits about his feet. He knew that she regarded him much as she looked upon her stepfather—only with some slight respect, regard, admiration, filial feeling. Truly he had been far more a father to her than her mother's second husband had—and truly that had not been much. Was it not his duty, now, to really play a part paternal with her? The time had come when she must be removed from certain influences—principally the Sevigny influence—or suffer ardent and undoubted danger. He was convinced of that. Yes; he must find a place for her.

Having reached this comfortable conclusion, he felt most meritorious and went around the corner, to sit at a small table in the restaurant of a prosperous Italian, reading a month-old French newspaper, while he ate his sausages and macaroni.

At about that time Bettina reached her home, which was the third flat in a building cornered on a thoroughfare named for the birthplace of some few of New York's early settlers. There is no other street in New York City quite like Amsterdam Avenue—compound of important traffic artery from the dense downtown business city to the dense uptown dormitory town, residence street for some in moderate circumstances and many of circuitous and doubtful means of living, with ground floors given over, half and half, perhaps, to flats and little retail businesses, among which saloons predominate (of course, for it is in New York), and among which the imported delicatessen store shares honors with the native grocery.

The hallway into which the young girl turned was compressed between a delicatessen and a drug-store, and, while it was not without pretensions in the way of cut-stone and beveled glass, it sadly needed soap and water on its intricately tiled floor. A tall and slender youth, very, if somewhat cheaply elegant, so long-haired that he might as well have worn a badge proclaiming: "I am musical, oh, very temperamental," drooped gracefully on the stone balustrade which flanked its doorsteps. He had been glaring fiercely at a grocer's helper, who had laughed loudly at his hair; but he greeted her with smiles.

"Oh, *there* you are!" said she, a little sharply.

He answered with a foreign accent, which a stranger, hearing him, would have found it puzzling to entirely identify. Truth was that it was compound of an inborn twist gained from Alsatian parents, which had been adamant against the public schools of the East Side, and a mixture of the French and German tendencies of newcomers to these shores, which he had carefully devised, because he thought it made him interesting to the pupils (whom he fought hard to get) of his piano lessons. The musical instructors' ranks in New York City are much overcrowded. No man must let the lack of anything so slight as a queer accent stand between him and the bare necessities of life.

Theodore Sevigny was sufficiently a Scotchman, despite the actual mixture of his blood, to know this, and to have invented a very fascinating way of lisping, slurring, rumbling r's and complicating sentences.

Also he used these various abilities dramatically, rolling eyes and shrugging shoulders with a lavish generosity of gesture which was unsafe in mixed company of those small New York boys who scorn affectation, but which had often proved effective with young lady pupils and their even more impressionable mammas.

"Bet-*teen*-ah!" he now cried, dramatically, as if she had arisen unexpectedly out of the tomb at a time when he had quite abandoned hope that she could ever come to life.

He did not himself know just why he practiced all his arts with such unceasing assiduity upon Bettina and her mother, Mrs. Curtis. He was by no means sure that he was seriously anxious to impress them; he was by no means sure he was not. Perhaps he loved Bettina. Certainly he wished to have her think he did, for that would make her thrill with love for him and Theodore was over-fond of being loved—admired—regarded as a genius—anything which took him vividly into the limelight, no matter of what slight importance might that limelight be.

"Poor Theodore!" said she. "Have you been worried?"

"When you did not leave the ogre's den at six o'clock," said he, "I was insane with fright, but finally decided that you probably had told the wolf—the snake—the wild hy-*een*-ah—that you would no longer pose for him." His hat was in his hand. He threw his head about until his long hair flopped. "So I came here, at once. Then, when your mother told

me you had not come home—ah, Bet-*teen*-ah! I was frightened. If you had delayed another moment I should have gone to the police!"

She laughed. He frequently amused her, even when he most impressed her.

"You laugh at me—you laugh at your own Theodore!" he cried, distressed.

She sobered. He frequently impressed her, even when he most amused her.

"Nothing tragic's happened," she assured him. "I had a row with Murfree. That was all. And it took time. It was delightful!"

"The ogre!"

"I don't think he ever really tried to eat me, but I almost bit his head off!"

His eyes were big with horror. "But he didn't——"

"No, no, Theodore." She was annoyed by the stupidity of his imaginings. "Come upstairs. I'll tell you all about it."

Theodore shrank slightly. "No; Bettina: no, I won't go in to-night."

"Why? What's the matter? Is father home?"

"He came while I was waiting for you, and—he almost saw me."

The girl's face grew grave. She plainly wished to hurry up the stairs; yet she paused long enough to tell her story in a few short words.

"He got sorry afterward—Murfree, I mean," said she, "and while we quarreled I made up my mind to quit that sort of thing—the posing."

"Bet-*teen*-ah!" the pianist cried with fervor and delight.

Her work had always stirred him with a sort of jealousy. He had not argued much against it, because none knew better than himself how much the money which she earned was needed by her family, and none was less inclined than he to offer to replace it with money of his own securing. He had never risen in hot wrath against her posing, therefore, yet he now felt a comfortable thrill of satisfaction at the thought that she would pose no more.

"Well, I told him I had made my mind up and should stop it."

"Was that what caused the quarrel?"

"No; I think it was because he said I wiggled my left knee that I exploded. I only thought of it while I was standing by the door for half an hour, waiting for him to unlock it."

"Did he unlock it?"

"No, he didn't; and I got to thinking. Then I stopped asking him to let me out and went back and sat down. We had a little talk, and when I began to pose again——"

"Oh, Bettina!" Sevigny made a gesture of despair. He made fine gestures of despair, and, knowing this, made them quite frequently. And, as arguments against her posing, they could not be taken very seriously—they were mild protests, which he knew would never make her cease her work, although they put him upon record as objecting to it. His was a facile, diplomatic mind.

"When I began to pose again," the girl continued calmly, "I told him I was going to stop."

"I suppose he got more furious than ever."

"No; you don't know Murfree. He did not at all. He said he'd rather have a blonde. He was very much astonished, for a while, but then he talked the matter over with me nicely and decided, finally, that he would help me find some other work which would do just as well and which has not such—disadvantages."

"Some—shop?" gasped Theodore. Should she work in a shop, then his artistic soul, he knew, would find itself unable to endure association with her. It would be too tragic!

She caught this vagrant thought and went on quickly with her explanation. "No; not a shop. I told him that I couldn't possibly do that; but that if some of his rich and fashionable friends—he has a lot of them, you know: old-fashioned, but a few of them so rich that it is wicked—should want me to become companion to their wives or governess to their small children, why—I told him that the work must be genteel; but I told him that I wanted to stop posing. And he's going to try to find a place for me.

"I've got to do it, Theodore, even if it's out of town. As things stand, now, I'm getting on—I'm nineteen in a month or two—and I'm not meeting any —er—anyone with money." She had almost let slip "any men", but had adroitly caught herself.

But her meaning did not escape him. He was stirred.

"Men with money!" he exclaimed, insulted. "Bet-*teen*-ah! What of me?"

She smiled at him with admiration blended with good-natured tolerance. "You know 'what of you'. You haven't anything. If your opera is ever produced and makes a fortune—or, if—oh, if anything occurs, why then——"

He dropped his head in resignation. "Ah, poverty!"

"You don't like it, Theodore, any more than I do."

"It grinds and crushes, stifling the artistic fires!" he carefully admitted.

"And your artistic fires must not be stifled," she said very earnestly. It was plain that even if Sevigny sometimes was amusing to her, she still had real respect for his ability. Perhaps she loved him. Who could say? Surely not Bettina, though Sevigny thought she could.

"I suppose that we must call it Fate!" he murmured.

"It's common sense," was her matter-of-fact comment.

"Oh, Bet-*teen*-ah, I——"

Now he had a rival in the exclamation of her name. Her mother called it from the head of the first flight of stairs.

"You down there, Bettina? Your stepfather's home and angry because dinner's waiting."

"Animal!" Sevigny growled.

"Theodore!" said Bettina sternly.

"How can you defend him?" he asked hopelessly,

and, giving her small and pleasant hand a rapid pressure, faded off into the nimbus an electric light was building in the thickening fog which, now, was creeping upward through the sloping streets which led across Broadway, across Riverside Drive and to the Hudson.

After he had gone a block on Amsterdam, he turned eastward until he reached the whang and clatter of Columbus Avenue, where surface cars and elevated railroad make the early evening sound like a Titanic boiler-shop wherein fire-alarms are frequently exclaimed by gongs.

CHAPTER II

Downtown in the studio, Murfree sat in a deep revery. It was not definitely built of thoughts of the young girl who recently had left him, clothed and in her right mind, after having spent the day unclothed, and most of it in anything but a right mind.

Principally he was dreaming of his past—the old, old past, which seemed so very far away that it was scarcely real; the past when he had gone to college in a lovely little city in the western part of New York state, when through work which had seemed wonderful to him and had seemed good to others, he had won a scholarship transporting him to Paris, when he had strained and struggled in the Quartier, trying to make ends meet and discovering new evidences daily that even if the art which won the scholarship was good, it yet was less divine than much which concentrated there in the great schools.

Young Murfree had lost heart ere he had left the Paris ateliers, and so he cared much less to dwell upon his memories of those bleak days than upon memories of the bright ones which preceded them, when, unsophisticated, gallantly aspiring, egotistical and unaware that other youths were able and as violently ambitious, he had dreamed himself the conqueror of the artistic world.

Most of his friends in the western New York college also had seen him in that light. It had been a definitely commercial-legal class. He, almost alone, had stood in it for art, and perhaps it had been because of this that he, as well as others, had so sadly over-estimated his abilities. The awakening had been less tragic than it would have been if it had been more sudden. It had been so gradual that it had brought discouragement, not despair. And this discouragement had settled him into the rut which he had followed ever since—a certain number of good pictures every year, which sold with surety at fair prices, a membership in such good art societies as he cared to spend his scanty money on in unartistic, crude New York. New York would ever seem to him new-built and raw—he could not see its grandeurs as some foreigners of his own craft could see them when they came to visit, fresh from their own soft wonders of aged harmonies, softened picturesqueness.

He felt that he had been an artisan, rather than the artist he had hoped to be, felt confident of being. His pictures had not sold to multi-millionaires of picture wisdom or able to buy picture wisdom; they had not been sold to galleries; they had not even sold to the hard-up, who, loving pictures, manage to pick up a good one, now and then, at a low price. They had sold to the banal who speak of pictures as "oil paintings", even, sometimes, to the stores which advertised them as "hand-painted"—that was the bitterest blow of all.

Bettina's slim young nudity was nowhere hung in

very honored company, though it was rarely hung in really dishonorable company, for Murfree's nudes were most respectable. Clubs did not buy them; café proprietors turned on them jaded and uninterested eyes; they fitted only those who felt a little horror of the nude, but enough of being out of fashion to make purchases of the least nude of nudes because they felt some sort of nude to be a necessary proof of their emancipation. These things old Murfree sat there considering rather bitterly.

They had been brought to mind by a long letter, received that day, from an old college friend. He had sometimes wondered how it had been possible for Alston to remain in the small western New York state town, content with the career which he could fashion from the law there, when he had been acknowledged in his college days to be so brilliant in his promise. Was it possible that Alston, whom he always had looked down upon a little, because he had not made "the plunge" into the icy waters of New York's professional struggle, had, really, shown greater bravery, and, above all, better sense than he? He knew that his old friend, up there in Belleville, had waxed prosperous, and, although he had not married, had presumably been happy. Heaven knew that he, himself, had been neither prosperous nor happy in New York! Would it have been the better course had he gone to the city of his birth and there worked steadily for an important standing in a "little puddle" rather than to have come to the metropolis, striving for an unimportant eddy in the seething sea?

The only reason he had never married had been that he had found the girl he first loved so unworthy of him that he had then thrown the sex aside as wholly worthless. He remembered with a good deal of disgust the fervor with which he had adored the pretty creature who had since become Bettina's mother, after eloping with a worthless clerk, a race-track hanger-on, cheap soldier of small fortunes.

Had Alston had a similar experience? Could it be true, as he had heard in some far, half-forgotten gossip, that he had loved the girl "Fred" Hoffman married? If so, then his chagrin and disappointment must have been far deeper than his own, for she, if he remembered rightly, had developed into really notable importance in the little city, and had made dear old "Fred" Hoffman—how they all had loved "Fred" Hoffman!—the very best, most capable, most sympathetic of wives.

Yet Alston had not soured because of this. He had struck his gait in the small city, never faltered, and had come to be the leader of the bar there. His friendship for "Fred" Hoffman had not wavered. Apparently he had submitted to his loss of Anna Merrivale to "Fred", as, in the class, all the boys had stood aside when "Fred" had wanted anything—disappointed, very likely, but submissive and by no means rancorous.

What a personality "Fred's" was! He had been a "grinder" at his studies, yet a very forceful "grinder," and most "grinders" are not forceful. When he had engaged in sports he had done well at them, in the

debates he had invariably won through simple, ruthless hammering at the opposition, in social life he had been conqueror because he rode indifferent to, even ignorant of, rivalries. No man in college had caused anger oftener, none had had fewer enemies.

He wondered just what kind of husband "Fred" had made to the delightful girl whom Alston lost to him. He, himself, had known her slightly. He could imagine Hoffman as her husband—she was so feminine and yielding, he so dominant. They must have been a happy pair; he thought she liked to yield, and, certainly, "Fred" liked to dominate. But—ah, poor Alston!

From such thoughts his mind turned to his dinner, which had been due half an hour, and the calls of appetite were now insistent; he lived a most methodical existence. He looked at his big, somewhat battered silver watch. Alston and "Fred" Hoffman, doubtless, carried gold ones of great price. This was the same watch which he had carried through those long-past college years. And from his thoughts of dinner came, again, quite naturally, thoughts about Bettina's mother. How she had cooked, in those days, long bygone! She even then had had in her the germ which, now, has brought about the angels of the chafing-dish, who cast together with apparent carelessness absurd concoctions, set them bubbling over alcohol, and serve them smoking hot, and heavenly, at midnight.

Her first husband had departed very promptly from this world as soon as he had fathered three. Then

she had married Curtis. What a pity it had been! Or, after all, had it been, really? As a woman, could she possibly have been what he had thought she would be? Had she ever had the potentialities which he had attributed to her? He wondered if he still cared for her and decided that he did not, but kept the old illusion living in his heart because there were so few illusions there that, lacking it, that heart would have been far too empty for his comfort. Still, he must do what he could do for poor Bettina, although there lurked within his breast a firm conviction that the girl was really a little devil, that she did not genuinely deserve the deep solicitude which he was giving her. When he reproached himself for having let her pose for him a smile of skepticism grew upon his face—he knew she had enjoyed it from the first, when, at the age of three, she had held a tiny bow and arrow loosely in her chubby hands and been a Cupid for a set of valentines which he was painting for a lithographic house. Had it not been for him she would have been upon the list of every artist in the street, one of the sad and weary company of girls who spend a good part of their waking hours in tramping from one studio to another, seeking work.

No, when he carefully considered it, he could not feel that he had done her any injury, and he was sure that he had done her many services. He had helped her red-hot temper in keeping vicious young men clear of her, failing, only, with the marvelously absurd and doubly dangerous Sevigny; he had seen to it that she had from his scanty earnings enough in-

come so that her natural indolence prevented her from seeking work at posing for younger and less scrupulous painters who might have been delighted, for more reasons than would have been apparent on the surface, to jot her name and address down in the small books wherein they kept available young women listed.

But still a duty rested on him—the duty which he had explained to her that evening. No one else was looking after her; it was unquestionably his place to do what he found possible to do.

He laughed. "I might have been her father!" he reflected.

Alston would be just the man with whom to talk the matter over. Undoubtedly, in a small place, like Belleville, where well-educated girls were prosperous and not likely to be looking for employment, there was some old woman who wished to have books read to her, some parents looking for a polished governess for youngsters—and Bettina spoke French, German and Italian: spoke them well, for he, himself, had taught her, and was fairly grounded in the common rudiments of other knowledge, for he had seen to it that she went through a New York grammar school and then a high school. She had an uncanny trick of learning and did not forget. Many and pathetic had been the complaints made of her by her teachers, but none had ever said she would not study, or was stupid. She would make an ideal governess for little children—if it did not chance that she decided to scratch out their eyes or drown them.

He pondered long upon these possibilities, because to one who knew her as he did they were so obvious. She had made a very strong appeal to him, when she had been a little child, she had been the only little child whom he had ever known except to viciously dislike, but it was highly probable that parents might object to having their young darlings martyred at the hands of a cub tigress, even though he, Murfree, wished to help that little tigress on to the fine and competent young womanhood which circumstances, at the moment, seemed likely to deny to her. No; he would not try to find her a position as teacher of the young; he would try to find her a position as companion to the aged, or assistant to midway-maturity.

And, just as he reached this sage decision, Alston came.

"Well, well—you dear old painter of good pictures!—how are you?" the lawyer's voice was saying before he really had entered. And as he entered he laid both hands on Murfree's shoulders, held him off, and contemplated him.

"Was your train late, or have you been starving me for old-time's sake? You never cared for food, so very much, if I remember rightly," Murfree grumbled, as he shook his caller's hand with fervent joy, and hustled him into the room and to a place before the dusty, flickering gas-log.

"Train was late," said Alston. "No snow here in New York City, but in the country—why, the woods are full of it—six feet deep. We had a fight till two o'clock this afternoon."

"You must be hungry, then."

"Can't stop thinking about food and drink, can you?" cried Alston happily. "You never could. How well I remember when you smuggled chicken-pie into the dormitory, hid it in my bed, and then, before you could confide in me, got changed into the other wing for some of your infernal deviltries—painting ballet-girls upon the chapel walls, I think it was. I knew nothing of the chicken-pie, and when I went to bed I found it unexpectedly. I sat in it."

"Yes," said Murfree, wrathily, "and spoiled it."

"Spoiled the pie? Of course I did. I thought it was a nest of vipers. It's a sad and solemn moment, Tommy, when one plunges one's bare body, at the dead of night, into an unexpected chicken-pie! I spoiled the pie, and spoiled the midnight silence—and the dormitory rules, and my own record."

"Heavens! I can hear you yet, you Indian! You sounded like a bugle with hysterics."

"Everybody heard me, not excluding prexy. And you remember what I got for it?"

"Yes; and served you right for yelling like a girl who sees a mouse, when you were merely sitting in delicious pastry. But, Alston, I'll say this for you, old chap, you never told who put the pie there."

"Of course I never told."

"Some of the fellows would have."

"Not any of our crowd! Imagine old Fred Hoffman telling!"

"No; he would have kept it quiet, but not everyone is a Fred Hoffman."

"Not anyone but Fred is a Fred Hoffman."

"Tell me. How is Fred?"

"He's as grouchy, and successful, and dominant, and egotistical, and good-hearted as he ever was."

"Happy, is he?"

"Why, I think so. He thinks not. To hear him talk you would believe him miserable. He's always finding that the times are worse than they have ever been, his business is continually going to the dogs, his son is frivolous and idle—a fine boy, Murfree, Harry is: just like his father; his daughter—she's the dearest girl! more like her mother—well, his daughter's being educated in a convent, started a year and more ago, and, while Fred declares it is a wild and idiotic scheme to send a girl away from home, he really is very proud of the fine fact that she will have a chance to learn what he calls 'fripperies'. Oh, Fred's all right—if you don't listen to his stories."

"He's made money, damn him, and so have you."

"What does money count, old fellow? You, yourself, have preached to me, hours at a time, that money is the root of evil and was made for one thing only—to be spent."

"I've learned some things since then."

As they talked Alston's eyes were roving round the dimly lighted studio. There were not many decorations in it. None of the canvases on view were finished. Murfree noted with a keen amusement that, as they roved, his eyes shrank, somewhat, from the cluttering, half-painted nudes. There was no false modesty about him—it was real embarrassment. He

never mentioned that he felt it in the studio, but Murfree knew of it, and joyed in the distress the nudes occasioned. He was certain this could not have been much more acute had all the undraped, uncompleted paint-and-canvas ladies been full born and made of flesh and blood.

It was probably because he knew that, and because, with Alston's presence, a bit of the old malicious pleasure in another's keen embarrassment, which had been so vivid in his college days, returned to him, that, rising, he went from one great canvas to another, seeking for the one which would most notably be shocking to his friend. He found a wood nymph, beckoning to a satyr and had placed his hands upon it, ready to convey it to the small circle of good light about the fire-place, anxious to observe his friend's face as, politely but unwillingly, he looked at it, and then to shout with loud, derisive laughter at his shrinking, when he bethought himself that on this canvas were Bettina's face and form preserved for the frank study of the present and ensuing generations of the world at large. As he wished, especially, that Alston should think well of her, for her own sake, he hesitated, turned the canvas to the wall, produced another one which showed another model, and denied himself the joy of watching Alston. Instead, while the latter was engaged trying to appreciate the picture fairly, not to condemn it definitely and at once, which it was his tendency to do, he casually concealed all other canvases which happened to reveal Bettina's face sufficiently so that later the old lawyer

might remember it and recognize her from it. Thus he hid Bettina, thoroughly, as he believed, although he quite forgot, in truth, a little canvas he had given Alston, not more than six months before, which showed the girl as Undine—beautiful, alluring, beckoning the responsive waves to rush to her, embrace her.

"Fine, isn't it?" he said, at length, turning back to Alston, who was still pretending to be looking at the first painting he had called to his attention. In reality his eyes dodged it. Such things actually hurt him—always had. He had even stood there with his eyes closed tightly, pretending to be looking.

"Er—wonderful!" said Alston. "Ah—it seems to me, old chap, that you are—er—improving year by year."

"I'll bet your eyes are glazed by fright till you can't see it," said the artist. "You may turn them from it, if you like. You have gazed at it enough to be polite."

"Really—it's very lovely," Alston murmured. "Only—well, we won't go into that again. But the world has spent a good share of its effort and its income to devising and creating clothes for human beings. The fact that they wear clothes is that thing which most proves their high superiority above the beasts. I never could quite understand why it was thought especially good art to show them—er—especially—er—females—without any of the high result of mankind's highest evidence of progressive elevation."

"To the pure all things are pure, Alston—that's the reason, doubtless, why I see the beauty only and no harm in it."

"And, by implication," Alston replied, laughing, "that's the reason, in reverse, why I see——"

"Exactly so. Exactly so."

The artist took the canvas off the easel and stood it, face to wall, where the lawyer could not even see the back of it. Then he led him to a chair before the fire and sank into one adjoining. But his malice was not spent.

"You've found the law remunerative, haven't you?" he asked.

"Why, yes; fairly so," said Alston. "Can't complain."

"Um—and so pure!" breathed Murfree, with a sigh as of regret that he had passed a sanctified profession by and taken up such devil's work as painting pictures.

Alston burst into a roar of laughter. "There—you've put it over on me," he cried heartily. "Can't you call a truce?"

"Divorce work, very largely, yours has been, old fellow, hasn't it?" asked Murfree.

Alston threw his hands up. "Help! Help! I am beaten!" he admitted. "Yes, I've handled many cases."

But a little later, in a graver mood, he returned to this especial detail of discussion. "I've not taken dirty cases, Murfree. When a man's been tied to someone who was very terrible, I've helped him out. Some

women, man, are horrid beyond power of words to tell."

"But never men?"

"Some men are worse than any woman ever was," said Alston, with finality. "I've helped more women out than men."

Murfree laughed with boyish pleasure. "Same old Alston. In your heart you're the identical kid who licked Biff Dangerfield because he called the German dining-room girl a 'fraulein'. Remember, do you? You didn't know a word of German, and thought 'fraulein' must be some part of speech of 'frowsy'. Thought he had insulted her. Beat him to a pulp."

Alston laughed. "Well, he deserved it, upon general principles."

"Sure enough, he did! Are you as gallant now as then?"

Alston looked up quizzically. "Try to be. But I've not licked anybody lately, though I've heard far too many vile things spoken about women."

"Anxious, as you ever were, to help them when you can?"

"Every bit," said Alston heartily. "Every bit—and then some."

"That's why you get divorces for 'em?"

The lawyer's face was serious as he replied: "It has been so more than once."

"Well, I think I've got a job for you."

"Divorce? Why, Murfree! Of course, if there is any lady who wants to be divorced from you, I shall be glad to give my services. God knows, if she *can*

be divorced from you, she needs my help. When were you married?"

"No; she's not in need of help as serious as that. The woman who would marry me would not deserve assistance. It's not a woman I am thinking of, at all; it's a young girl."

"Worse yet!"

"She needs help worse," said Murfree. Then he settled in his chair and gave himself a little shake as if he threw off some disinclination. "I'm going to tell you the whole story—it's a short one. Briefly the sad tale is this: I was in love, once, and——"

"You were in love one hundred and seven times that I remember," Alston answered. "I——"

"I mean really in love. The girl liked me, too, but thought my art was foolish, decided that it never could produce an income, in which estimate she was exactly right, and threw me over, very justifiably."

"You probably were lucky to escape her—if she'd do that."

"I was. But, still, that doesn't matter. You'd have fewer cases, probably, if young people thought more about money before they rushed up to the altar."

"Go on. Don't stop to spout philosophy. Your spoutings always are such twaddle."

"Well, she wouldn't marry me, when the pinch came. She married someone else."

"Someone with money?"

"Someone everyone believed would be a rich man early."

"And he wasn't?"

"No; he turned out bad. Lost his bank job because he speculated, then took to gambling, then to drinking. Then he went down and out. He was absolutely no good in the world. Then she married someone else. A worse one of the same sort. She and her children—I'll admit it is her children, mostly —have to buy his board and clothes."

There was a vibrant tone of sympathy in Alston's voice as he spoke now. Finding that the tale which all their banter had led up to very intimately touched the life of this dear friend, he instantly regarded it with real respect. It was a trait of his—one of the many traits which made men love him. "And you want to help her?" he inquired. "Is there something I can do?"

"No," said Murfree, "I don't want to help her. She's become a rather terrible old woman—not so very old, perhaps, but very terrible. I guess I was a lucky dog."

"Well?"

"But she's got a daughter, Alston," Murfree said, not very comfortably.

He was planning, he had suddenly become aware, to play it rather low on his friend.

"She's got a daughter; and it's the girl I want to help." He wondered if he could be doing violence to friendship by refraining from the revelation—that the daughter was a model. "I've sort of watched her, and she needs to get out of the city."

"Health bad, eh?"

"Er—it's not exactly that."

Murfree did not know just what to say. He was asking Alston to introduce the girl into some friend's house—and he must be very careful. He, himself, did not believe a model to be necessarily undesirable —he had known many whom he fondly thought to be good girls. This may have been because of his superior discernment; it may have been because of heaven-sent innocence and trustfulness and blindness.

"It's not exactly that," he said again. "It's that I think she'd better get away from—well, there's a young musician—a pianist, sort of a composer, whom I think——"

"Ah, unmaking matches, are you? That's what you criticized me for."

"I'm trying hard to do it before it is too late to do it thoroughly. I'm preventing. Prevention's worth a pound of cure, you know."

"Well, what about the girl?"

"I wondered if you didn't know some place there, where you live, where she could earn an honest living as companion, or—er—something of that kind. She knows a sort of housekeeping—the poor kind that girls learn in little flats; she can sew some—for she has to make her own clothes, and they're always rather pretty; she can read aloud quite well and knows French and German. I taught her French, myself."

"Then she speaks it well, old man."

"Yes, she really does. And she can play and sing. This chap that I'm afraid she'll marry—he's no good, in the world, you know—but he's rather a high-class musician and she keeps up with him—I heard him say."

"What a paragon!"

"Oh, she's not a paragon! She's got a temper, sometimes, that would make the fiend himself go into some still room in Hell and sob with envy; but she only shows it to close friends—like me. She'd never let it slip its leash before a stranger."

"Only bites the hand that feeds her, eh? Well, that's like all women—good and bad. The trait is feminine."

"Shut up! I'm not a woman-hater, please remember, though I've had it rougher, far, than ever you did."

"It proves you to be truly of the art artistic, as we used to say in the old days. One who is of the art artistic never does have sense."

"Piffle!"

"Wisdom! Wisdom is the lawyer's stock in trade, you know."

"Keep such wisdom for your clients. They'll pay fees for it and never know you're cheating 'em. But I'd like to have this girl get some sort of a show in life."

"I don't think of any chance for her, at present; but if you say she is worth helping, why, I'll try to help. I—like to help!"

There was a strangely sweet, benevolent expression on the aged lawyer's face, as he said this, and Murfree caught it.

"You damned old fraud! Of course you like to help! Don't you suppose I know it?"

"Well, now that that is settled—now that I've

agreed to find a job for your old sweetheart's daughter—if I can—where composers don't corrupt nor yet musicians burglarize and steal, let's go to dinner. I'm half-starved. You probably did not intend to feed—I have the thought that artists often don't; but——"

"It's not so bad as that," said Murfree, grinning. "I've never capitalized my genius as a liar, as the men in some professions do, but I've not gone necessarily hungry since I left the Latin Quarter, twenty years ago."

"Then why do you starve me?"

Murfree went to get his hat and coat, feeling rather satisfied with what he had accomplished. He was glad Alston had not asked him if the girl had ever worked, and, if she had, at what; if he had told him she had posed for him—like that! He argued with himself, convincingly, that Bettina was a good girl—so far as the essentials went; that he had not imposed upon his old pal's friendship in asking his assistance for her; he was glad that he had hidden all the canvases which she had posed for.

"Come on and eat," he said, when he returned. "I know a place where they can actually make *bouillabaise*—a heavenly stew, of which, as you have never been in Paris, you have never known the joys."

Next morning, when he had told Bettina what he had been planning for her, that beautiful young person showed scant gratitude. She was crouched upon an old bearskin, close by the radiator, waiting for the

steam to get sufficient head to make the airy costume of the nymph she was to personate less tempting to pneumonia.

"What, I?" she cried, in that high treble to which her voice rose when she was excited. "I—off there in the country—reading to some deaf old woman, or —or—stewing lamb!"

"Bettina," Murfree answered kindly, "I'm going to tell you why I hope you'll go—if the chance comes."

"You'll have to do some telling!"

And he did do some telling, but without great effect. His arguments that her present life could not lead her to successful, happy womanhood were futile; his statements that he feared her marriage to Sevigny would result in tragedy provoked her laughter.

"Poor Theodore! We've never even talked of marriage!"

Murfree was nonplussed. "You've never talked of marriage! What have you talked about?"

She flared at him. "Marriage! Marriage is all right if it means money; but what is it if it does not? My mother's marriage shows! Her certificate was a through ticket to—you know the place!"

"I loved your mother once, Bettina. That's why I have endeavored to be kind to you."

"Yes; she told me. Are you glad, or sorry, that she didn't marry you? Would you have been a happier man if she *had* married you? I don't believe you would! Would she have been a happier woman?

How could she have been? If you'd had a wife and family to support on what you've made out of your pictures, you'd not have done much better by them than poor dad has, in spite of all his gambling and drinking. Dad's a bad lot. I know that. But he has raised us—somehow!"

"You don't propose to marry, then?"

"I didn't say that. I only said I never thought of marrying Theodore Sevigny, and he never thought of marrying me."

"Then you're too much together."

"Bah! In the first place I know the wisdom of really being careful. You needn't fear—I'll not throw my life away *that* way. But wait till I get married!"

There was a gleam of sophistication in her eyes which almost scared him.

"You will be safer, then, eh?" he suggested sourly, disapprovingly.

"Don't be a beast to-day. Still, that's true enough."

"I want too many things to think seriously about Theodore," she went on, slowly, tapping her bare foot upon the floor. She had pulled the bearskin up about her and sat at ease before him. "He knows I want too many things. He couldn't get them for me—unless he sold a comic opera, and he won't try comic operas—he writes better things—the things that never bring returns."

"You're only building misery for you and him, then, by being with him, always."

She sat in gloomy silence.

"I'm afraid you're one of those unfortunates who

must have money if they are to enjoy life," he presently went on. "You might get it if you took some chance like that which I am planning to discover for you."

"How might I?" The lovely lips curled skeptically; the robe which she had caught around her silken shoulders slipped as they relaxed, and she had to catch it to her tightly; her big eyes looked up at Murfree with real interest.

"By making a good marriage. There are prosperous young men out in Alston's town whom you might make happy."

She laughed, somewhat scornfully.

"Who might make you happy, then, if that's the better way to put it."

"Is it a rich place—Belleville?"

"The richest little city in the state."

The steam had warmed the room and she took the pose, without a word from him, which was unusual, and held it without slanging him, without protest from him, which was still more unusual. During the rest periods she sat in moody, studious silence. When they lunched together she said very little. When the light began to fail and he laid down his palette she went behind the screen to dress without a word. It was while she was engaged there that she reached her great decision, calling out to him:

"All right; Belleville for mine—if you can get it for me. But I warn you—if I go there, I shall own it; I shall steal it. I just *won't* be poor!"

CHAPTER III

Next day, as Alston bustled about town, his mind continually reverted to his various talks with Murfree. He was very fond of Murfree.

"The man is lonely," he reflected. "That is why he's bitter."

And he, himself, was lonely. They, two lonely single men, had much to say about the failure of the modern marriage to supply actual happiness to other men and women, but—what else did? It had been lack of it which had left their own lives barren.

On street corners, everywhere about town, stood collectors for the Salvation Army, each garbed in the red, fur-trimmed coat and long white whiskers of a Santa Claus, ringing a little bell, pointing to an iron pot hanging from a tripod and covered with wire netting of coarse mesh. Through this mesh the public was invited to drop coins to be used in purchasing a mammoth Christmas dinner for the city's poor. The counterfeit saints represented the great Christmas spirit, which is particularly that of family life, and so they emphasized the gloom of his reflections.

As he glanced resentfully at one of these picturesque and lawful mendicants a tiny girl ran up to the gay beggar and held her hand out while she

gazed into his face with wondering, trustful eyes.

"Mr. Sandy Claus, will you s'ake hands wiz me?" she asked.

Santa, being more intelligent than most, did so with alacrity and a bright smile, asking her, moreover (while her parents stood close by, smiling somewhat doubtfully), what she would like to have for Christmas. She told him confidentially, whispering into his ear when he bent over. The parents waited, after having dropped a quarter through the wires into his pot to "keep it boiling."

They had not gone far, after she had left the saint and joined them, when the child's mother hurried back and held a hasty conversation with the Santa Claus.

Alston could see the father up the street, keeping the child's attention focused on the gay display in a store window. He caught a word or two of the brief conversation between the mother and the beggar. She had run back to find out what the child had asked for, and "Santa Claus" revealed that the little girl's petition had been for a china tea set and a baby brother.

The mother smiled a little, blushed a little, as if this stranger in a red coat had surprised a family secret, gave a final quarter, not to the greedy pot, but to the ready hand of "Santa Claus," and went her way.

The lawyer felt singularly futile, singularly lonely, as he hurried on, after he had watched the trio till they vanished in the merry crowd of Christmas

shoppers up the grimy avenue. Theirs was a happiness which he could never know. Even in his childhood he had been denied the joys the little girl was even then experiencing, for he had lived in the deep country with a strict, unsentimental uncle, who had not let him "believe" in Santa Claus. Not having married, because Anna had decided upon Fred, not him, since he had reached maturity he had also been denied the joys of parenthood. How he envied the fond father whose big hand had clasped the crumpled rose-leaf fist of this dear child as they had stood at that shop window! How he envied Hoffman! How he envied happiness!

Ah, what he and poor old Murfree had missed out of life! It was with a solemn face that he passed into the entrance to the tunnel, which would take him to the station whence his home train would depart, and, although he had not previously made the startling trip beneath the Hudson, he was scarcely conscious of the details of the unique journey. The wide, electric-lighted, cement-floored cars, with their white metal rods for the "standees," and their wholly useless windows, offering a continuous panorama of close and dripping tunnel walls; the sparse crowd of returning Christmas shoppers, bundle-burdened, and most of them tired out, would have closely held his interest had he been less absorbed by his grim thoughts. Now he scarcely noted them. Yet it was a variation of the Christmas spirit that presently began to work in him. He was too healthy-minded to waste time upon self-sympathy. His own life had

gone wrong; now what could he accomplish to save other lives from a like fate? How full existence is of misses! How infinitely hard should strong hearts strive to lift the gloom a little for other weaker hearts who cannot help themselves!

Murfree, in telling him the story of the girl for whom he sought employment, had omitted much and emphasized everything which would be likely to make sympathy for her, although, of course, Alston did not know this. And so his altruism now turned naturally to her. And by assisting her he also might help Anna.

His first hour in the smoking-room of the westward speeding Pullman was devoted to consideration of this case. He wanted to give Christmas presents—wanted to with something which amounted almost to a passion. He longed for someone to imbue with joy—someone all his own—but, lacking someone of his own, could he do better than to help this girl to whom Murfree had referred, than to help Anna, in whose service he ever was so ready to enlist?

He would speak to Anna of her, as soon as he reached Belleville. The situation in the Hoffman family would be ideal for her, and Anna, his friend's wife, his lost sweetheart, needed someone. She was getting old. They all were getting old. He was, himself, past fifty; Fred was a year his senior; Anna must be forty-five, or more, and her hair, like Fred's and his, was whitening. Yes, he would help the girl, and, helping her, help Anna and himself. It did help him —helped everyone—to do kind deeds. It had been kind of Murfree to suggest it—Murfree who also

looked back on a wasted life! He sighed and called the porter to make up his berth.

Snow was falling steadily when he awoke, and the train was hours behind time. The slowly whirling landscape was smothered in its coverlet of white; at one stop he watched with interest the operations of a lineman's gang as they repaired "down" wires, sagged and broken by the weight of moist, clinging snow. Scheduled to reach Buffalo before early breakfast time, the train was without a diner and no breakfast was obtainable, although it was close to nine o'clock. He had had an early dinner the preceding day, so he would have been uncomfortable enough even had the car been rightly warmed, but it was not. He felt forlorn and continued his reflections, casting on them even deeper gloom than yesterday's. Yes, his life was wasted; Murfree's life was wasted. What did all this conservation folks were talking of amount to? Forests? Water-power? The coal supply? Bah! They were unimportant. What men must try to save were their own lives!

And instantly his lawyer's mind caught up that answer which it had just given itself, and called it into sharp analysis. It was not their lives at all that men should save. Why labor for the preservation of so poor a thing as the average man's life? Life? Life? What did life mean—frankly, honestly and analytically—to him, for instance? Nothing very joyous, that was certain; yet his was an existence infinitely happier than that of the majority. What did life mean for Murfree? Less than it meant for him!

What might life mean for the girl whom Murfree spoke of, if she did not speedily have help? What did life mean for Anna? Much it had meant, doubtless; little it meant now, he feared.

Nothing could be truer waste than the salvation of some lives; their preservation was extravagance; they meant nothing after they were saved. True conservation would entail the giving to them of a meaning. To preserve comfort and save self-respect was bigger than to salvage life. He must make this the thesis of one of his jabberous arguments with Hoffman, who would not agree with him.

Yet what was Hoffman getting out of life, although much there was which he might get from it? Despite the blessings which had showered upon him—a perfect wife (had not he striven for her himself?); prosperity, a manly son and charming daughter—Fred became grouchier with each succeeding year, apparently less satisfied, readier to find fault. What ailed him? Had he no appreciation? How infinitely he was really blessed above most men! How richly had he been endowed, compared, for instance, to himself and Murfree!

When the train had finally crawled into Belleville, nosing through the snow, hours late, and losing time with every revolution of its wheels, he gathered all his Christmas packages together and alighted heavily. He felt older than he ever had before, and his appetite for breakfast had departed. He determined to send everything to the hotel—he lived at the hotel, and how he hated thought of it that morning!—and

go straight to his office. He hoped things would run smoothly there. He was in no mood for a hard day.

There was no hack in waiting, the trolley tracks were blocked by the deep snow, and so, on foot, he struggled through the narrow and far from continuous pathway which already had been shoveled along the main streets of the little city—incongruously fronted, now by a block of business buildings, now by a block of residences, left from the old village days, and, invariably, upon this street, very solid, very ugly, very elegant. Most of them were square, of brick, topped by equally square cupolas, suggesting large and comfortable rooms within, but vile offenses against beauty, despite their spacious lawns, whereon the habitual evergreens were weighted almost to the breaking point with snow, and the cast-iron deer were almost buried.

As he neared the largest of these cubical and solemn residences he glanced at it with a new curiosity. Much of his speculation on the train had been devoted to its occupants, for it was "Fred" Hoffman's residence, had been his father's and his grandfather's before him, and would be Harry's, doubtless, after "Fred" had gone. It looked grave, respectable and competent, but, Alston decided, remarkably thick-headed. It suggested only comfort, yet he felt certain that when the master of that house had left that morning he had done so with a frown, after having found fault with the weather, with his breakfast, with his son, with business, very likely with his absent daughter, and almost surely with his wife. Such had be-

come Fred Hoffman's way. What, therefore, was the use of the great house and spacious lawn with evergreens and two cast-iron deer? The lawyer smiled somewhat wryly as he realized the pessimism of his thoughts and tried to charge them to his lack of breakfast, although he knew quite well that they must rightfully be charged to other lacks, more serious by far.

As he passed, "Barbie," who, with a mammoth broom, was struggling to remove the snow from the brick pathway leading from the street gate, saw him and ran, lurching, down to greet him. Barbie was a character with many privileges. She had been a servant in the Hoffman household long before its present master married.

The snow was deep and falling steadily, but she was not dismayed by it; shod in mighty rubber boots, she floundered by the shortest cut to the stone fence and smiled across it at him.

"Hello, Barbie!" he cried, trying to be genial.

"Morning, Mr. Alston. Why don't you come right in to breakfast? Poor thing! Know you haven't had any. Come in! The old gentleman has gone down to the office, and Mr. Harry's gone with him, but the coffee's hot, and I'll have some eggs and bacon ready in a jiffy. You'll like it better, probably, than Mr. Hoffman did. He almost snapped my head off!"

He wavered, yielded. He knew that she could safely take such liberties as asking him to breakfast, and he wanted to secure an opportunity for talk with Anna. He admired no woman more. The love which he

once had felt for her had been modified into the fine respect a man should feel for his friend's wife.

"Good morning, Anna," he said cordially, as she came forward, greeting him. "Barbie has asked me in to breakfast." He smiled whimsically, as if he wished to have the invitation confirmed.

"Barbie is always right," she indorsed cordially.

"Humph! I wish Mr. Hoffman thought so," Barbie ventured, evidently filled with bitter memories of some unappreciative comment.

Anna Hoffman was a striking figure as she stood and smiled at Alston, ignoring the complaint, while Barbie took his hat and coat, fur gloves and heavy muffler.

Anna's graying hair and finely lined, aristocratic face, her tall, carefully groomed figure, plainly, but exceedingly well dressed, were indicative of a very definite personality. Her slim, peculiarly white hands, rare among the residents of small American cities, were as aristocratic as her finely chiseled countenance; and she was graceful.

Alston looked at her with a fresh interest, due possibly to mere absence for a week from town and sight of her, more likely to be properly attributed to the talks which he had had with Murfree about olden days and his reveries upon the train. Anna had been the detail which had made Fred's life superior to his and Murfree's. Why wasn't the man happier? He loved Hoffman with that undemonstrative man's affection which sometimes lasts from college days, extending through maturity, and, when it does, be-

comes one of the finest types of human love; but there had been times when he had envied him almost enough to really affect that friendship. Everything had been his from the start. In college he had had more money than any of the boys; when his college days had ended he had stepped from them into the business which had become his own upon his father's death, a few years afterward. This business he had settled down to with a dogged resolution, doubling it and trebling it until it had become a really great enterprise.

Everything, it seemed to Alston, as he thought about it, had gone smoothly with Fred Hoffman—he had won the woman whom he loved; his circumstances had been more than comfortable; he had two lovely children, a fine, manly boy and a sweet girl; he was a man of eminence in his part of the state; he had nothing to look back upon with much regret; he had never sown wild oats—he had never had a chance to. Yet he doubted if his annual balance sheet of happiness and sorrow showed a higher profit than his own. Why? Why?

Wherein had the world gone wrong with him? He wondered if it could be that the world had offered him monotony—a monotony of money-profit, certainly, and a monotony of domestic happiness, of steady, ceaseless, notable achievement. Nothing had come easily to him, but nothing had presented such great difficulties that by the exercise of able perseverance he had not been able to attain it. He had had no downs. That the up had been a gradual rise may

have robbed it of some interest; perhaps the man's life had lacked drama. He wondered if it could be that—wondered as he sat opposite the woman he, himself, had hoped to marry, and watched her as she drew his coffee from a silver urn belonging to another man.

"Of what can you be thinking so intently?" Anna asked him, as she handed him his coffee. "I hope your New York trip was not a disappointment to you."

"On the contrary," said Alston, smiling back at her, "it was successful. I did everything I went to do, and one thing which I did not even think of doing till I had begun the journey. It was a very pleasant trip. I must confess that I was tempted to remain another day or two when I read in the newspapers of the deep snow here at home."

"The deepest we have had for years," she answered placidly. It was plain, and Alston made a mental note of it, that deep snow or no snow at all made little difference to her. Hers, at least, was a contented mind, even if he felt assured that Hoffman's was not.

"They must be snowed in in the country districts."

"They have had to send out teams with plows to break the roads."

"Didn't you tell me that you thought of having some young woman here to help you, if you could find the right sort, Anna?"

"Yes; I have been thinking of it, but I scarcely know just where to look."

"Humph!" said Barbie, who was listening, and instantly intensely jealous. "Don't I help enough?"

"You're as good as fifty, Barbie," Anna answered, smiling with her comfortable calm, "but we both need help."

"Needn't get *me* any!" Barbie left with a tremendous sniff.

Alston laughed. "Perhaps I've made myself unpopular with Barbie," he suggested. "I hadn't thought of that. But I remembered you were talking about getting someone—someone who could read aloud, who knew something about music, and who could help the youngsters, when they were at home, with one of the various languages in which it is considered necessary nowadays that youngsters become proficient."

"Yes; but I want such a paragon! I doubt if I shall find one."

"I rather think I have discovered the very paragon you're looking for. Old Murfree—dear old chap, he's not got much, but still is always helping someone! —told me of her in New York. He takes an interest in her because he used to love her mother. She threw him over for a worthless stick, and now the family is in some straits, I understand. I imagine that he tries to help them variously."

"How very nice of him!"

"Old Murfree has a sweet and mighty soul. He's worried about her. He fears she's falling in love with someone he does not approve of. I think he called him a musician—that is, I know he called him something more emphatic, but I think he said the

man is a pianist and composer. Murfree seems to think that if the girl remains in New York City she may marry him, and that her life will be a miserable existence if she does."

"Did you see her?"

"Yes; and she seemed rather ladylike—quite well bred, indeed. She speaks German and French, plays, sings, reads aloud divinely, Murfree says, and has learned such housekeeping as careless mothers teach their daughters in those little, bandbox, New York flats. Not much, I guess. What homes! Like cells in a honeycomb—or penitentiary. But she could take a good deal off your hands, and she would be amusing, Anna. I thought of you at once when Murfree spoke of her."

"It was very nice of you. Have you her address?"

Alston copied it for her from his vest-pocket note book.

"I shall write to her at once. Fred thinks the plan of having some one who is not definitely a servant is quite silly; but I tell him that I'm getting old, as well as he, and that he has young Valentine, down at the works, for just about what I wish some one for, here at the house. And he will soon have Harry also."

"Don't let him bulldoze you," said Alston, laughing. "All men are selfish. Really, we are beasts. I've been feeling it acutely since I've been away."

"I shall never think that either Fred or you could be a beast," said Anna. "How different you are from other men!"

"Yes, Fred with his grouches, which mean nothing,

and I with my wishes, which accomplish nothing! We are very useless!" He rose. "It was a delightful breakfast. Thank Barbie for me. Shall I write old Murfree that you'll give his protégée a trial?"

"Tell him that I'm writing to her," Anna answered.

Christmas Eve was always an occasion at the Hoffman residence. This year Anna and Barbie for the first time in their lives called in help to raise the decorations, but, when they were completed, sank wearied into two chairs to view them. Barbie looked at them with jaundiced eye. She had not approved of the assistance, although she had admitted that her legs were "breaking off where they grew on" after she, herself, had tried an hour upon the stepladder.

"Bells ain't in the middle of either of them wreaths at the two sides of the piano," she said wrathily. "Looks cross-eyed. Where'd she put that ladder?"

Anna smiled at her and put a hand upon her arm. "Never mind them, Barbie. They're quite right enough. Save your strength for all the cooking. You say you'll have no help but Ann Eliza, in the kitchen, and she's so incompetent. You'll need all your energies and the wreaths are straight enough."

"Think so?" said the old and privileged servant. "Wait till Mr. Hoffman sees 'em! Wait till the old gentleman gets sight of 'em! Next thing to taking money from his safe, late years, is to let anything hang crooked. Did she take the ladder downstairs, Mrs. Hoffman?"

"Never mind them, Barbie. They're all right. Mr.

Hoffman won't say anything about them. You must get over the idea that he is so cross."

Barbie looked at her with some astonishment. "Get over the idea that he is so cross!" said she. "How's a body to get over the idea that he's cross unless he stops *being* cross. *Cross!* My knees begin to tremble before he turns in at the gate. Let me get the ladder——"

Anna made a gesture of amused despair. "Well, if you wish to, Barbie, but you mustn't be afraid of Mr. Hoffman. He barks a little more than he once did, but he——"

"Doesn't bite?" asked Barbie, starting for the ladder. "I ain't sure he won't bite me some day. Mrs. Hoffman, I wish you'd seen him stick his head out toward me at the breakfast table! I nearly dropped the coffee-urn. And all I'd done was let the toast fall!"

"You have too much to do," said Anna, smiling. "That's why I have been thinking about having some one here to help a little. Don't you see."

"But, Mrs. Hoffman, I——"

Anna laughed. "You old, jealous thing! She shan't go near the kitchen—ever. But *I* need some one. I am getting old, Barbie, and——"

"Well, if it's for you, all right, if you *want* anybody. If *you're* willing to admit you're getting old; but as for me—well, Mrs. Hoffman, I won't have any one around my kitchen bothering! I think I've got the right to say; been in that kitchen thirty years: I won't, Mrs. Hoffman."

"All right, Barbie; all right. And she hasn't come yet. She may not care to come; if she comes I may not like her. I've only just this moment written. The letter's not yet in the mail."

"Better keep it out, then, I say."

In the thrill of worry over this new enterprise, through which might come encroachment on her kitchen, Barbie forgot about the straightening of the wreaths, as she went about the work of hanging other Christmas greens. Then came the tying up of packages with holly ribbon, and their arrangement on the hat-rack, ready for delivery when the boy came from the mills to run about with them, and the preparation at the kitchen door of another, larger pile, of bulkier gifts—a pile from which tied feet of turkeys bristled, to be delivered on a wagon to chosen workingmen and the few otherwise uncared-for needy of the prosperous little town. Mrs. Hoffman always gave this matter closer thought than any one else in the small city; so elaborate were her Christmas benefactions of this kind that the church charities had only their own poor to look after. And this pile grew as Barbie and the negress worked steadily and well. It may be mentioned that the negress did this under protest, and that Barbie met her plaints with continually increasing vigor. Finally came dusk, and then the early darkness of the short winter day.

Suddenly a door slammed. At the moment Ann Eliza was bound on a cross-kitchen journey, bearing in her arms a tower of tinware. Barbie started at the slamming of the door as if an electric shock had

thrilled her, paused where she was, half-apprehensively, and then turned sharply upon Ann Eliza, with a warning finger raised. Seeing the tin tower toppling, she warned hissingly, impressively, accusingly:

"Don't you let one fall! Don't you dare to drop 'em! The old gentleman has just come in. *The old gentleman!*"

Startled, Ann Eliza paused, standing with a drooping lower jaw, spellbound by fright. "Why, Miss Ba'bie, Ah wuz——"

The tin tower swayed every second in a wider arc, and its guardian's eyes were rolling, noting everything but that.

"They're falling!" Barbie hissed. *"They're falling. Stop 'em. The old gentleman——"*

Crash! went the tins upon the floor.

"Oh! mercy, mercy, mercy!" exclaimed Barbie, fluttering with apprehension. "Mercy, mercy, mercy!"

"Well, now, Miss Ba'bie."

Barbie scarcely looked in the direction of the frightened negress. "Wait!" was all she said.

Nor was the waiting long. Within a moment the kitchen door swung open and in it there was framed the angry, florid features, the tall, rigid form of the master of the house.

"What's this infernal racket!" he said bitterly. "This place sounds more like a boiler-shop than like a kitchen."

"Oh, Mr. Hoffman," Barbie explained nervously, "you see, she—why she just let 'em fall."

"I didn't see, I heard," said Hoffman. "Such a racket! Try to be more careful, can't you?"

"Yes, sir, yes, sir, Mr. Hoffman!"

"'Yes, sir, yes, sir, Mr. Hoffman!'" he mimicked angrily. "It's always 'yes, sir, yes, sir, Mr. Hoffman,' but the racket keeps on just the same."

"Yes, sir, yes, sir, Mr. Hoffman!" Barbie murmured in distress, but the door had closed behind the angry man.

"The old gentleman's so touchy these days!" worried the aged servant. "No matter what a body does——"

Her trembling hands, in raising one of the fallen tins, lost grip on it and let it fall again. Terrified, she sank into a chair, her eyes fixed apprehensively upon the door, but he did not return.

She was just serving up the dinner when she heard his voice again, and again stopped her work to stand in tremulous apprehension as it called from the dining-room:

"Barbie! Barbie!"

"Yes, Mr. Hoffman," she said timidly, as she opened the swinging door to answer him.

"Who hung those wreaths?"

"Oh, land's sakes alive!" she cried, in new distress. "If they didn't slip my mind! Mrs. Hoffman said to me that you'd be angry; but when you flew at me out in the kitchen when Ann Eliza dropped them pans, I—— why, Mr. Hoffman—why, you see——"

He looked at her with smoldering annoyance in his eyes and his broad forehead seamed with frowns.

"I see that they have not been straightened," he replied. "Now straighten them!"

"Fred," said Anna quietly. "Fred, dear!" She was evidently making some reminder.

"If you please," he added fiercely. "If you please."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Hoffman; yes, sir," Barbie worried, and started toward the wreaths.

"We will have dinner first, Barbie," said Anna very quietly, her calm unruffled. "You can straighten the wreaths afterward." She turned to her husband. "There is a good deal of extra work just now," she said, not apologetically, but in explanation. "Barbie has been very busy getting all the Christmas cooking done." Then, to Barbie: "Bring in the dinner, Barbie, when it's ready."

"Yes, Mrs. Hoffman," said the flurried servant. "But, my, I'm so flustered now I'll likely drop the roast."

"Very likely," Hoffman commented discontentedly.

"Fred!" said his wife reprovingly.

When Barbie had gone out and let the swinging doors fall to behind her, Anna told him quietly and unexcitedly of what she had been planning.

"Mr. Alston ran in here for breakfast," she began.

"Ran in here for breakfast!" exclaimed Hoffman, plainly much surprised.

"Yes; his train was late and Barbie saw him going by. He thinks he may have found some one to help me."

"Help you to do what?"

"And help Barbie."

"Help her throw the tinware in salute when I come in?"

Anna Hoffman paid no heed to his grumpiness. "We're a little overstrained. We need help."

"Well, if you need help, then why don't you get help?" he demanded. "Where's Harry?" The boy was on vacation from Columbia Law School.

"He'll be along. We won't keep dinner waiting for him. He went downtown to buy Christmas presents. And he's young, you know."

Her husband looked at her in new annoyance. "'He's young!' of course he's young. Is that any reason why he shouldn't be here promptly for his dinner?"

"He said he might have dinner with Mr. Valentine. I rather hope that Valentine may interest him in Belleville affairs. He finds it hard to care much for them—very naturally. And in two more years he'll have to."

"Well, it won't be such a great misfortune. Anyway, he'll have to!"

"Yes; poor boy! He'll have to."

"'Poor boy!' Nobody 'poor boyed' to me when *I* had to settle down."

"Perhaps you might have understood a little better if some one had, Fred. You missed it, didn't you?"

"It made no difference, if I did."

"Well, if you missed it, then you wanted it; it would have helped to make you happy. Let's do what we can to give the children all the happiness we did not have."

"There are other things than happiness to be considered in this world!"

"And, Fred, they'll be considered, whether we wish them to be or whether we do not."

"You're having your own way with Beatrice. She's getting fancy learning at that convent—she's getting quite enough for the whole family. This law school for Harry is mere foolishness."

"He'll settle down, dear, when he has to."

"It's already time he started in to. What he needs to learn is not a lot of fancy law stuff, but the *business*—the business I have built up for him."

"Well, Fred, he will, when the time comes." Her heart thrilled with worry when the talk took channels of this sort. She was constantly afraid her husband would take Harry out of Law School.

They ate dinner in a silence somewhat grim, and it was not cheered when Harry called up by the telephone rather late, plainly as an after-thought, to say that he had gone to dinner with Valentine, his father's superintendent at the mills.

Hoffman heard the news with discontent. "Valentine is as flighty as Harry is himself!" he grumbled.

"They're not either of them really flighty," his wife urged. "They're not as old as we are, Fred. Valentine works hard enough, and Harry's time will come."

"'As old as we are!'" he quoted almost angrily. "You'd think I was a grandfather, to hear you talk!"

"Well, Fred, it probably won't be very long before you are a grandfather and I a grandmother. Beatrice will finish school this year, and Senator Stevenson

came in this afternoon—he's home for the Christmas adjournment—to laugh with me about his ward, Dorothy Mason, and our Harry. He's delighted with the prospect. Aren't you?"

The mention of the Senator gave her husband something to consider of which he evidently very much approved.

"A fine old statesman," he said unctuously. "A gentleman of the old school. He was just becoming eminent in the law when Alston and I began at college."

"Yes; he *is* a fine old gentleman."

"There," said Hoffman with some satisfaction. "You *may* call *him* old. But I wish you wouldn't constantly refer to me or to yourself as 'old.' We're *not* old, Anna."

"I feel old sometimes, Fred."

There was a sudden peal of the front door bell and then another and another. Anna started up, almost frightened. Hoffman rose annoyed.

"Some of Harry's friends!" he grumbled. "Young ideas of humor——"

Anna was gazing curiously after Barbie, who had hastened from the kitchen, and turned to smile at him.

"There! You see, Fred? We *are* getting old. What you said then granted it."

"Nothing of the sort."

Barbie's cry of joy came to them through the opened doors which she had left behind her.

"Who can it be?" said Anna.

"Well, why don't you go and see?"

But there was no opportunity. A lithe, delighted girl flashed from the hall and clasped her arms round Anna's neck.

"Mother!" she cried. "You never dreamed that I'd come home for Christmas, did you?"

"Beatrice!" said Hoffman, his face breaking into smiles. "How you've surprised us!"

"Dear old father!" She left her mother's arms and clung to him.

A youth rushed in from the hall, bearing bags in each strong hand.

"Isn't it great?" he cried. "I saw her from the hotel window as she stood upon the station platform looking for the hack, and I left Valentine and dinner with a rush. He can eat mine, if he wants to. It was me for home and little sister as soon as I saw her."

"You're a dear old Harry!" Beatrice approved. "I'd been begging to come home, and when they finally decided that I might, why, *I* decided that I would surprise you all. Sister Gertrude wished to telegraph, but I just wouldn't let her. How are you, Barbie—dear old Barbie!—give me another kiss. Oh, everybody kiss me! I'm so glad to be here—and I can stay until the thirty-first. Can't stay for New Year's day, but—why don't you *kiss* me? I don't believe you're glad to see me!"

Hoffman watched her with a face changed utterly. For the moment the grim, critical, complaining look, which had been habitual with him, of late, gave way to an expression of delighted joy. His erect and youth-

ful figure, which strikingly contradicted the pronounced gray of his hair, towered over her, and he held her to his breast again, and looked down at her with fine pride.

"Well, that convent doesn't seem to have kept you from getting tall!" he said, with a father's exultation. "You're almost a button higher on my vest. How you have shot up!"

She threw her head back, laughing at him. "I was standing on my tiptoes—because I am so glad. Dear daddy, I'm through growing long ago. I'm a young lady now. You really must remember that! They're very careful at the convent. They never call us seniors girls. We are young *ladies!*"

"Young fiddlesticks!" said he, and pressed his arm about her.

Anna looked at them with keen delight. No joy could have been greater than that she felt at seeing her dear daughter; but that her presence seemed sure to quell her husband's irritable moods, at least momentarily, gave her a certain additional satisfaction which she might have been unwilling to acknowledge, even to herself.

. . . . . .

Meanwhile, in the New York studio, old Murfree was having with Bettina a difficult half-hour.

"I'm not going!" she had just declared, tapping her foot upon the model's platform, from which she had been sufficiently long absent to have assumed her street costume. "I'm not going—not a step. What? Into that wilderness? I think not!"

"But, Bettina, it will be a fine thing for you! Think! You won't have to pose."

"Oh, I don't mind posing."

"But you're always grumbling over it."

"What if I am?" She turned large eyes upon him, full of amazement because he should have dreamed that grumbling meant dissatisfaction. "A woman has a right to grumble."

"Well, it will be better for you, anyway. It's not good for you to pose. It hasn't hurt you, probably, to pose for me——"

She laughed, rippingly, contemptuously, and her eyes snapped. "To pose for you! Oh, you? No; it hasn't hurt me any, I suppose, to pose for you. Wasn't it lucky mamma didn't marry you?"

He looked at her bewildered.

"Lucky? How?"

"Because you would have been my father. And you are so stupid! I never could have stood it."

"Bettina," he said slowly, "if I had married your mother our—our child would never have been you, or anything like you."

She laughed again insultingly—she could be amazingly insulting—and turned slow, affronting eyes on him.

"I'm going to go, though, if they want me," she admitted. "I was tormenting you. I've got to meet some men whom I can marry. Theodore's waiting for me downstairs, now, I think, and I must hurry to him——"

Murfree raised his hands in wrath. "He'd better

wait downstairs!" he cried. "He'd better not come up! Pianists! How I hate them! Bettina, that man——"

"You *do* hate them—him—don't you?" she said calmly. "Well, I can't marry Theodore. I wish I could. But, Murfree, I will not be poor!" Her mood went through one of its quick changes. Quick changes, in Bettina's moods, were frequent. She became almost impassioned, speaking with fierce emphasis. "I won't be poor! I won't! If there are rich men up there, then I'll go!"

"After that, I ought to write and tell them not to have you."

"You won't, though. You're too afraid I'll marry Theodore, if I stay here. You don't understand how utterly impossible it would be. But if I had a rich husband—from the country——"

He burst into wrath. "You little devil! If you had a rich husband from the country! I suppose you mean that then you might be able to afford your Theodore—afford him on the side, eh? You've as much conscience as a cat!"

"Don't be insulting, please. Still——"

"God, Bettina! If——"

A heavy step outside the studio door, a rustling underneath it and the shrill trilling of a whistle announced the mail's arrival. Murfree, shaking his head wrathily, went to the door, picking up the letter.

"It's from Alston," he announced, as he examined it. After he had read it he continued: "They'll expect you. Fred Hoffman's wife has written to you.

He has fixed it for you. When I write the introduction for you, shall I tell them that you wish to marry, there in Belleville—a rich man—so that you can—ah—afford your Theodore Pianosmasher?"

"You won't," she said confidently. "You're too anxious to get me out of New York City and away from him. Sometimes I think you're jealous of him."

"Jealous of him! God Almighty!" He raised his hands in helpless wrath. "Because I was an ass, so many years ago that I've forgotten just how many, and loved your mother, who preferred a drunkard; because I've tried to help you, for the sake of that old love; because I wish to save you from destruction and give you a fair chance in life, although I know you'll never take the right advantage of it; because I'm trying, really and honestly, to help you, you insult me by declaring that I'm jealous of that damned pianist! I suppose you mean that I'm in love with you. I'm as much in love with you, you little satiny she-devil, as I am with any other pretty snake!"

The outburst did not in the least impress her. Instead she gazed at him, as he stood, shaken by his wrath, and laughed delightfully. Her merry trills were quite extraordinary.

"Well, I must hurry down to Theodore. He gets angry if I keep him waiting!"

"Your Theodore! I'd like to choke him! I wish you'd marry him! Heavens, he deserves it!"

She paid no attention to this vicious shot, but ran gaily from the room.

It was hours before old Murfree could sufficiently compose himself to write to Alston, saying that his protégée would leave New York, as the lawyer's letter had suggested, so that she would reach Belleville early on the first day of the year.

CHAPTER IV

Snow, snow, and still more snow marked Christmas Day at Belleville. Each of the plows which made the streets a possibility for traffic was hauled by four strong horses, few of the sidewalks had been cleared by noon, house yards communicating through slender paths with the narrow cuttings in the roadways, which had been provided with occasional niches in which pedestrians could take refuge when sleighs passed.

And sleighs were passing on Main Street constantly, in time to the music of chimed bells jingling, and the even merrier lilt of laughter. All morning came bobsleds, laden with brisk parties from near rural districts, the women bundled into balls of woolens, the men red-cheeked, with steaming breath, each driving his weary horses with one hand while he slapped the other on his mighty coat to warm it. As the forenoon progressed, sleighs of a fancier shape and glossier emerging from the city barns, bore as elaborately, although less uncouthly bundled, town parties toward the country—parties wrapped in furs, rather than in woolens. But whether they were wrapped in furs or woolens, all were laughing, singing, the women and girls screaming at the "thank-you-ma'ams," the men and boys intensely busy with brisk animals enlivened by the frosty air, or engaged in husbanding of robes

which, now and then, masked sly but earnest hugs of waists slim underneath their multitudinous wrappings, but so guarded against cold that it now required long arms to get about them. Arms long enough were ready for the task.

In the houses of this prosperous little city merriment reigned supreme. There were poor in Belleville, but that dire poverty which in the greater cities makes the Christmas season saddest of all times to those who know and understand was here so rare, so understood and so well-cared for, that it nowhere swung its somber flag of misery upon the open highways. Ann Eliza's pickaninnies were wrapped in so many tatters that they did not mind the cold; they had sumptuously breakfasted; they knew that in the oven a great turkey, gift of Mrs. Hoffman, was already hidden, and would be ready early, so that their mother might present it to their greedy little paunches before going to assist in serving dinner at the big house on Main Street; their black hands were muffled in brand-new red mittens from the A. M. E. Church Christmas tree, which had glittered bravely the night before, and their pockets bulged with Christmas fruits and nuts and sweets. In a town like Belleville the American Christmas shines its brightest; there, really, "peace on earth, good-will to men" seems somewhat actual; frowns of discontent, harsh voices, sorrow, are all rarities upon the holiday.

Yet in the big house on Main Street where the Hoffmans lived, where reigned prosperity, where, in the early morning, shouts and laughter had rung out as

Beatrice and Harry, held by their mother to be still children on this day, discovered what their gifts were, where Barbie worried over countless goodies in the kitchen and the pantry, where no material thing was lacking to make the day a feast of plenty, there was apparent, none the less, a taint of discontent. The master of the house was finding it a difficult matter to present a smiling face to those who greeted him, his voice rasped a little, his smile was not invariably quite genuine.

It is highly probable that had he been required to make a statement of his reasons for his lack of Christmas feeling, he would have found the task beyond his power. Probably he would have passed it off as the involuntary expression of his worry over a bad business year, as the first of January, with its balance-striking neared; but such an explanation would have touched but the surface of reality.

In fact, his discontent was outgrowth of the accumulated dissatisfaction of a lifetime spent at effort far too concentrated. It was the bitter, deep dissatisfaction of the business man who, having won, finds that he has paid a great price for his victory, half realizes that in his constant fighting there has been little time for living, and, as the years advance inexorably, discovers that his taste for play, even his ability to really enjoy, has lessened, as he has won the means and opportunity for its indulgence.

As he had sat at breakfast, with his charming daughter at one side of the table, his bright and energetic son upon the other, and, across the board, his

quiet, placid wife—smiling, even though his nervous grouchiness toward her was constant—he found it necessary to continually battle with his growing and insistent dissatisfaction. He, himself, was somewhat appalled by the emotions which distressed him. He did not try to analyze them; he did not stop to tell himself that if his life had been largely barren of everything but effort, the fault had been his own, born of an overmastering ambition for success which had not tolerated leisure moments, which had rushed through the years, wrapped in an absorption so complete that it had scarcely vouchsafed to himself the time to learn how to enjoy.

It may have been the realization that his son and daughter were approaching real maturity which made him suddenly compute how many years had passed, how few remained to him; it may have been an unexpected visualization of the gray in his wife's hair, or the fact that, rising very late for him and dressing with unusual leisure, he had stared long and earnestly into the mirror in the bathroom, and for the first time fully realized that time's flight was becoming plain on his own head.

Whatever had occurred to flood the knowledge on him, it had come with an overwhelming rush, and, coming, had dismayed him, angered him. Ever since then he had been fighting it away, denying it, and this futile struggle against fact had put him in no placid frame of mind.

He seemed to see, that morning, with an unusually clear vision, and what he saw was principally age—

his own and Anna's—more Anna's than his own. If the youngsters' youth impressed him, it was to annoy. Even while he railed at fate for having rushed him out of childhood to maturity, pausing for no intermediate period, he railed at his own young for their indulgence in that very inconsequentiality which he regretted having missed.

The spirits of his children, however, were too vividly alight with youth to be extinguished, or even seriously dimmed by their father's gloomy and forbidding mood; indeed they were not definitely conscious that his face was more severe than usual, that his laughter came more grudgingly, holding a rasping note, that his words to Barbie were less gracious than they had been of old. They did not realize that his fitful study of their mother's face was not once—not for an instant—smiling. Absorbed by youth's fine egotism, filled with the wonder of their own development, busy with their own bright gossip, they did not dream that as they talked of all the joys they knew which he had never known, their father, who, to them, was interested only in important, grave affairs, and, so far as they knew, always had been somber, stern, never yearning otherwise, was, in truth, filled with a certain envy of them, even with a certain feeling of offense that they enjoyed, upon his bounty, such gaiety as his life had had far too little of. And had any one told Hoffman that at that Christmas breakfast he was jealous of his own offspring, angry with his wife for having aged, his denials would have been not less than vehement; yet these things were exactly true.

That there were those among the lines in his wife's face which had been put there by his own unceasing dominance, not always too considerate; that there were others there, born of her share in that struggle for success which he believed had been entirely his own herculean effort; that had he given her an easier life there might have been far fewer silver strands among the rich brown of her hair, he did not dream, far less acknowledge. That poor Barbie's awkwardness, tremulous fears of his complaints, slow service were manifestations of the same advance of years which made him notice them did not occur to him.

Far from being filled with the right spirit of the day, therefore, he found it difficult to share at all in the fine happiness of the young people; his wife's veiled glances of reproach when he spoke crabbedly did not reprove him, but exasperated him; he was unconsciously a little pleased that Anna was undoubtedly aware of his unpleasant state of mind; he found Barbie's fear of his sharp grumbling almost an agreeable tribute to his power; he was indefinitely angered when he saw that Beatrice and Harry were alike unconscious and unaffected by his dissatisfaction.

Before the first meal of the holiday had really ended he rose abruptly from the table.

"I'm going to the mills," he muttered, as the others raised their eyes in question.

"What? On Christmas day?" said Anna mildly, but astonished.

"Yes; on Christmas day." His voice was pettishly ill-natured.

"But, Fred——"

He was indefinitely ashamed; and the shame further angered him. "It's been a vicious year—a vicious year," he said, half in excuse. "And with this fine young lady and this fine young gentleman eating off their heads in fashionable schools——"

"But, Fred, you, yourself, have always said that they should have the things which we——"

"Yes, yes; I know, Anna," he exclaimed, now on the defensive. "Of course, I've always said that they should have the things we did not have. They're having them, aren't they? But the very fact that they are having them makes it doubly necessary that the mills should—grind their grist of profit, doesn't it?"

"But Christmas day!"

"On Christmas day a business man must think about the first of January. I must telephone to Valentine."

"Fred," said Anna, now definitely protesting, "go to the mills yourself, if you are sure you must, but don't make Mr. Valentine give up his Christmas day to business. He's young——"

"Am I so old, then?" He stood looking at her frowningly.

Beatrice and Harry hushed their badinage and reminiscences of convent and of college. They were worried. This was a false note in what they had been certain would be a day quite perfect. What ailed father?

"We are no longer young, Fred," Anna answered quietly, with that harried look which had been coming to her face of late with an increasing frequency.

"All the more reason, then," said he, "why I must make the most of the few years of life before me—make the most of them, so that these young folks"—again he spoke almost with bitterness—"may lead the fancy, idling lives that young folks live in these days."

Harry started from his seat to protest, but Hoffman strode out of the room.

The boy stood looking after him in sheer amazement.

"I don't know what's the matter with your father lately," said his mother almost hopelessly.

"Well, if he wants me to stop law school—I don't care much about it anyway. Mr. Alston's got all the really big practice—he and Senator Stevenson."

She smiled. "But you're of another generation, Harry. It will bring its business with it."

"But father is so grouchy."

"Don't, Harry!" his mother begged. Her nerves were all on edge.

Beatrice gazed at her with a girl's quicker sympathy and caught her off her guard. Since her arrival Anna had been careful to be cheerful, had made constant efforts to conceal from the bright eyes of her daughter the fact that life in the old home had complicated in the last two years, was complicating now with a bewildering rapidity.

"Why, mother!" the girl cried, almost alarmed and very definitely shocked. "You look so tired! Aren't you sleeping well?"

Anna smiled at her. "Yes, Beatrice; quite well."

"But you *do* look tired."

Harry made a rough guess at the reason and his soul began to strut as boys' souls will. "Mother," he inquired, "you needn't try to say it isn't so, father's wearing you to a mere frazzle. What's the matter with him?"

Anna rose in horrified protest. "Why, Harry, what a thing to say! I'm a little overtired, perhaps—that's all."

"Well, you let me know what I can do to help things out," said he, not realizing in the least that the one thing which might be done to help things out was not within his power of accomplishment and seemed beyond the ken of the one person who might do it.

She smiled at him. "Dear boy!"

He went to her and put his hand upon her shoulder. "You know you can count on me, momsie." He was trying to be comforting.

"Of course I can, dear."

But as she tried to smile at him her eyes filled, and she made an errand to the kitchen.

There Barbie caught the glint of tears upon her lashes. The old servant was up in arms at once.

"Mrs. Hoffman, has the old gentleman been saying more mean things to you?"

"Why, Barbie!" Her mistress' tone was one of shocked reproof.

"I know," said the servant sagely. "Cooks can keep their fingers out of broth that they're not cooking if they want many friends, but Mr. Hoffman—why he snips at me and snaps at you! No wonder to me, Mrs. Hoffman, that your eyes are getting pretty well washed

out and your mouth is running down-hill at both ends."

"Barbie!" said Anna, quite aghast. "Please never let me hear another word of that sort——"

"Mrs. Hoffman, to-day's Christmas. You can't be cross with me on Christmas." The old servant looked at her with a grim smile.

It conquered, and Anna gave her back one full of real affection. The time had long since passed when the ordinary discipline with which servants may be threatened could be even hinted at with Barbie.

"But you must stop your grumbling about Mr. Hoffman," Anna answered.

"Stop my grumbling about Mr. Hoffman!" Barbie cried, as if this thought was new. "It's the old gentleman that does the grumbling!"

Anna dismissed the subject with a question about dinner; but as Barbie started toward the kitchen, her mistress was reflecting with some melancholy that this Christmas dinner would lack many elements which had been ever present at such feasts in days gone by.

It did, as did the evening which succeeded it, and the days which followed that.

When, at the little early party gathered at the house, partly to watch the old year out and partly in the way of farewell merriment for Beatrice, who was to leave for the far convent school at 11 o'clock, Hoffman flared somewhat vividly at no less a personage than Senator Stevenson, up from Washington for the holidays, and bent upon the exposition in the district of his party's services to commerce, she was almost

frightened, for she saw Dorothy Mason, his ward, whom the Senator had brought, look up at Hoffman worried, even shocked, and saw that this was worrying Harry. It was among the darling projects of her mother's heart that Harry and this charming girl should marry.

It was a real relief to her when Harry pranced in, very handsome in his evening clothes, and whirled Dorothy away into the drawing-room, where Beatrice was playing old French waltzes. The Senator went after them, a smile upon his face, and stood in the wide doorway, watching them with satisfaction.

"Fred," said Anna carefully, "this is New Year's Eve, you know, and——"

"Well, what of it, Anna?" His voice was sharp, annoyed.

"Good nature is a part of hospitality." She was looking at him with more bewilderment than disapproval.

For a moment he was really abashed. "Yes, I know," he said at length, "but all these politicians want is——"

"You would not class the Senator among mere politicians, would you?"

"No; not exactly that; but——"

"Fred, I don't know what has come over you. It is true that we are growing old, but one may grow old gracefully."

"That's it!" he said, aroused anew. "I wish you wouldn't constantly talk age!" He looked at her without much favor.

"It is a thing which cannot be denied," she answered.

"I can deny it," he protested. "Look at Stevenson! He's fifteen years older than I am, and——"

"He is beginning to get feeble," Anna commented with a matter-of-fact accuracy which maddened him.

The Senator returned, bringing with him Alston, who, although he was Hoffman's junior by not more than a year or two, belied his age with his geniality. He had been dancing with the young folk, but even he was glad now to let his aging muscles rest.

"Why haven't you been in the other room and dancing?" he asked Hoffman.

"Dancing? Why, I haven't danced in years!"

"Getting old, eh?" said the genial lawyer. "Well, we all of us——"

"Old? No," said Hoffman with some emphasis. Then, in complaint: "There seems to be a real conspiracy on foot to make me think I am Methusalem. Anna has been saying to me——"

"Why don't you take *her* in, and show these youngsters the real art of dancing?" said the lawyer, not entirely in fun. He had been watching Anna's face.

Hoffman shook his head as if the very thought were an absurdity. "Oh, Anna wouldn't care to dance."

Alston wondered, with a sharp dismay, if the glance his friend had thrown toward his wife's face could possibly be one of critical dislike.

"Wouldn't she? That's where you're wrong. That's where you're making a mistake, Fred."

The lawyer's eyes were full of real distress. He loved these two, as if they had been of his family.

He could see that things were going wrong between them; he felt that all the blame, or most of it, at least, was on the man's part.

"Why don't you take the real success that God has given you, old man, and make the most of it?"

"If God gave me success, He made me work for it."

"Of course, otherwise it would not have been your own success. Why don't you enjoy it?"

Hoffman hunched his shoulders discontentedly. "Oh, I enjoy it, I suppose. But it's so full of pettinesses!"

"Life is made up of little things, old man—of very little things."

Again Hoffman shrugged his shoulders discontentedly.

Alston smiled quizzically at him. "I believe you're getting discontented in your old age, Fred. Discontented with the very things for which you have so striven."

Hoffman turned upon him angrily. "There it is again—'old age!' I tell you I'm not old! I won't be old!"

"Well, have it your own way, Fred. I'm old. Lord, how that polka made me puff!" He looked at his watch. "If I could stay two hours, Fred, I would be able to wish you happy New Year as the year comes in; but that's impossible. I must move along. It's the devil to be unattached. I have no excuse for refusing invitations that I don't want to accept."

"What time is it?"

"Half-past nine."

"And they're still dancing! Beatrice must catch that train at eleven!"

"Well, there's an hour and a half."

"An hour and a half! For her to dress and to say good-by in? Alston, you don't know women. Why, it takes ten minutes to drive down to the station!" He went to the door which opened on the drawing-room. "Beatrice," he called, "it's time for you to dress."

In a moment she came running toward him. "Is it ten so soon?"

"No; but it's half-past nine."

"But I don't have to dress till ten."

"What, with your train going at eleven?"

"Just one more dance, daddy. I have promised it."

"Well, make it a short one, then," said Anna, coming near.

"I believe you're anxious to get rid of me!"

"My dear!" Anna's voice was full of fond reproach. "Run in and have your dance then; but, really, it must be the last. You must not annoy your father by delaying."

"Annoy me!" said Hoffman. "I only want to have her make her train."

Anna sank into a chair, a cold chill about her heart.

Somehow the girl's words had rung curiously true. It was a fact that she felt little sorrow at the thought of Beatrice's going this time, when, in previous years, the nearing of the hour for her departure had bitterly distressed her. What could be the reason? A dozen times she multiplied the question in her mind, fighting off the answer, and then, finally admitted it.

It was the change in the girl's father, her own husband, which she feared to have her daughter remain long enough to see. A subtle, mystifying change, it was, but terrible.

When had it begun? What had given birth to it? What would it lead to? She would not let her stunned and weary brain formulate in words the truth of it; she would not let it formulate it even in emotions. But her heart knew it, shrank from it, grieved over it with such a grief as she had never known before, although that heart had been torn by the mighty sorrow of the loss of a first born. Now, when her husband and herself should be upon their placid way down the first gentle slopes of the declining years of their companionship, the clasp of their two hands was loosening. She could feel this very definitely—almost as definitely as if the relaxing clasp had been material, as if his actual fingers had been slipping from the despairing clinging of her own.

All this ill-temper, all his criticism of himself, poor Barbie, Harry, Beatrice, meant one thing only—he was somehow separating from her and the children, growing out of the old home. She knew perfectly that he had no other interest, yet the old interests now failed to satisfy. It made Beatrice's going far less tragic. How much more so would her staying be, if it were to reveal to her this grim and dreadful situation? It made the fact that Harry must return to college a relief to her.

As she sat there in the dim library and watched the young folk in the brilliant drawing-room whirl-

ing in that final, romping dance, listened to their chatter, sensed the growing beauty of her daughter, gloated fondly on the manly good looks of her son, her eyes filled with tears born of a new emotion. She desired above all things to have them go—to have them go before they gathered any inkling of the dreadful, if utterly intangible, metamorphosis which seemed to have been worked in the psychology of life within the comfortable, square brick house behind the evergreens on Belleville's Main Street.

What was the change in Fred which was so evident to her scared eyes? Could others see it? Did Barbie see it—that is, did she see more than the increasing bitterness of temper which so worried her? Had Harry noted it? Had Beatrice been in the least aware of it?

She could not think the children had really been conscious of it. They had suffered from it, but their discomfort had been vague. She knew that once or twice their father's manner toward her had a little shocked them, for once when Hoffman had spoken sharply to her Beatrice had laid her hand upon hers comfortingly in passing, and once her son had clasped her in his arms as soon as Hoffman had gone out, after an outburst of irritation; but she hoped they had not fully realized.

Still, it had been marked. They had been much away from home while they had been passing from childhood's age of calm acceptance into the beginning of the analytical stage of their development. And in their childhood days of calm acceptance, there had

been nothing for them to accept. Fred, in those days, had been different, ah, so different! Absorbed in business he had always been, but ill-natured, overbearing, unjust, never. Now . . . There was so much for them to see, if really their eyes were opened!

Her husband called her as he stood in the dining-room door, far down the hall.

"Well, Anna, are you ready? We don't want that child to miss her train!"

No, alas! she did not want that child to miss her train and remain another day to hear her father use that tone in speaking to her mother. She hastened to make ready for the sally out into the cold.

. . . . . .

It was late when they returned and she was weary both in mind and body. Worse, she was weary in her soul. Harry, unfretted by his sister's going, had started for the watch-night services at the Presbyterian church, with some misgivings as to their promise of entertainment, but determined to sap Belleville of the most it had to offer of excitement for the young, and she had been glad to have him leave them.

"I am really very tired, Fred," she said, as he turned up the light in the front hall. Barbie, of course, was at the watch-night meeting. Her Presbyterianism was devout.

He looked at her with plain surprise and some displeasure. How pale and drawn her face was! What had she been doing to herself? Why hadn't she preserved her looks, as other women did? He had noted those among their neighbors who had not allowed

themselves to fall away in their appearance as she had. That the earlier years of these, her first rivals in his mind, had been less strenuous than hers, he did not stop to think. That while she had been helping him build up his fortune they had been at ease on fortunes won already, or had remained at ease, content to see their husbands struggle without aid, did not recur to him to-night, although there had been days, in times gone by, when he had not lacked full appreciation of it and thought of them with grim contempt.

"Too tired, I suppose, to have a little talk," he grumbled.

She looked at him with something close to fright. What was it that he planned to say to her? Was it something about Harry? The mysterious intuition of a mother urged her to make inquiry, to protest if Fred was planning to let Harry leave the Law School and go into the business. Could he not realize that his son's circumstances and his own at his son's age were very different? His father had been struggling to build up an enterprise; his help had been imperative to its success. Now that enterprise was well-established and most prosperous, it in no way needed Harry. But did he plan to thrust him into it?

She could not argue with him that night. She would start the struggle, if there was to be one, in the morning.

"I am very tired," she said dully, "but if you wish to talk I shall be glad to listen, certainly. What is it, Fred?"

"I've been thinking about Harry," he said definitely.

Her heart throbbed almost wildly. So her worst fears were confirmed.

"Yes, Fred; what about him?"

"This Law School idea. Three years more of it. Don't you think it's rather silly?"

"I hadn't thought so. I supposed we had agreed on it."

"Well, yes; we had. I will admit that. But had we thought it over carefully enough? I had to go into the business. He ought to go into the business."

"But in the law he might build a career. Senator Stevenson feels sure he would. He has the inclination. Why not let him follow out the plan?"

"I know he has the inclination!" His voice was almost rough. It seemed to triumph, as if he had found out a secret which they all had tried to keep from him. "He has the inclination to stay there in New York City and have a gay and easy time of it for a few years. I——"

"Oh, Fred—no! You know Harry isn't——"

"Yes, yes, of course he isn't. I'm not saying anything against the boy—especially. But Valentine——"

"I thought Valentine was doing very well."

"He has no judgment—not a particle. I'm not saying anything against him, either; but when I was of his age——"

"Times were so different! Fred, too much was thrust on you when you were of the age of Mr. Valentine. Too much had been thrust on you when you were of Harry's age. But your father was less active than you are—older, far, even than we are."

It was a slip, and she had had fair warning; but she had not learned to look for warnings in her long married life. The Frederick Hoffman she had known in bygone years had not made it necessary that she search words and looks for omens of the things she must and must not say. She could not adjust herself.

" 'Older, even, than we are!' You talk as if we had a foot apiece hung in the grave! Anna, I wish you'd stop that. I won't be old. I won't have it, Anna!"

She had no conception of the depth of feeling which was hidden at the back of this remark; she had no conception of the storm of protest which was rising in this strong man's soul against the ruthlessness of Fate. She thought he must be playing with her, making a grim sort of game with her. How could he deny that he was growing old? She did not deny that she was.

"Who was it? King Canute? He tried to make the tide stop at his feet!" she said, trying to be gay.

To her surprise he turned toward her a face on which deep annoyance very plainly showed.

"There is a difference between attempting to combat a law of Nature and refusing to be misled into foolish error by a wrong conception," he said almost fiercely. "It's this miserable life here in this dead-and-alive, one-horse-power city, this ceaseless grind at thankless tasks, this never-ending slavery to outworn tradition——"

Puzzled beyond words, unwilling even to sit listening to him, she rose, perplexed, almost in despair, undreaming of the bizarre climax which was approaching in his hitherto conventional career.

"I'm sure I don't quite know what you are talking about, Fred." Her voice was dull and weary. "If you'll excuse me, I'll go up to bed. I'm very tired."

"By all means—go to bed," he answered, with no attempt to finish out his interrupted sentence.

She heard Harry, when he came in late, and knew his father had been sitting up for him, for, after the door closed, the murmuring of voices came up from the library for three-quarters of an hour. When, at last, her son came up the stairs in stocking-feet, so that he might not awaken her, she threw a wrapper over her night robe, slipped her feet into soft slippers and went down the hall to meet him.

He looked very glum in the flickering light which spread about his head from the candle in his hand.

"Did you have a good time, Harry?"

"Aw, mother!" he exclaimed disgustedly. "A nice time! It was a funeral! They watched the old year out, all right—they watched it down and out!"

"But it was a watch-night meeting, Harry!"

"It was as cheerful as it would have been if they had had it in a coffin, with candles at its head and feet, and had been waiting for the new year with a sponge of chloroform to suffocate it, too! Did you ever see such whiskers as there are in Belleville, mother? If I had had a set like Doctor Whipple's, in college, when I played the grave-digger in 'Omelet'——"

"In 'Hamlet,' dear?"

"No, 'Omelet'; it was a parody on that Shakespeare stuff. If I'd had a set of whiskers like the parson's,

the managers would have been after me with offers for the Winter Garden."

She was curiously sensitive. After Fred's complaints of Belleville, and their life there, which she had supposed had been so full of satisfying effort, and, therefore, had been so happy, to have her son complain of it, as if he, too, hated the old home, was almost more than she could bear.

"Harry, dear!" she cried. "I am so sorry! Oh, I hope——"

"Why, momsie, darling," he exclaimed, "what is the matter? You're not crying, are you? I didn't mean to make game of it. Is the deacon an old friend? Only—after college—and Law School—and then—what father said to me to-night——"

She put her hands upon his shoulders, definitely frightened. "What did he say, Harry?"

The boy's face was dark with discontent. "Hasn't he told you?"

"No; but I have been afraid to-night——"

"I'm not going back to Law School. He wants me in the factory. He says I've got to buckle down with Valentine and learn the darned old business!"

"Oh, Harry?" Her voice was almost a despairing mother's cry, but she quickly found her self-control. She must not oppose his father to her son. What she had to say about this she must say to Frederick himself. "Well, he probably knows best."

"I hope he'll give me a strong anæsthetic, so that it won't be so very painful," said the boy, and, kissing her, went on to bed.

CHAPTER V

The winter's second unusual storm swept the landscape which loafed slowly past the windows of the sleeping car. Miss Bettina Curtis watched it now and then with languid interest. She only watched it now and then, for the conductor of the train, the sleeping-car conductor, a traveling salesman of silk petticoats, a college boy and a venerable surgeon of great note, who was journeying to Buffalo to attend a consultation in connection with a merchant prince's innermost activities, were the car's other passengers and they scarcely saw the storm at all. Their eyes were mostly fixed on Miss Bettina Curtis. She knew it.

And she gloried in it. Not because she cared a rap for them: she was informed about the man who wants to flirt, and wise enough to take him very lightly; but it was an omen—it was an omen that she might succeed in the great enterprise on which she had embarked—the enterprise of making her companionship to Anna Hoffman (whom she in advance despised) entirely incidental to securing for herself for life the luxurious companionship of some rich man.

It was most exciting and encouraging. She was young; her definite sins had been almost unimportant; but now, although the car was most inadequately heated, the explorer's spirit thrilled in her until it

almost helped her to forget cold toes. She did not sense it as a fact, but when she had embarked upon that train she had become a real adventuress. Why should we laud "gentlemen adventurers" and tell their tales of gentlemanly slaughter, gentlemanly swindling, gentlemanly highwaymanship in lilting and inspiring song, while we turn our noses toward the ceiling at the word "adventuress"? "Lady adventuress"—I never heard the term.

It does not quite describe Bettina—she was neither quite a lady nor quite experienced enough to fit the meaning of that hard, although potentially romantic descriptive word "adventuress"; but stirring in her breast, beneath the snug and shapely, if most inexpensive, tailor-made which covered it, thrilled a delightful curiosity, unterrified, determined—and likely to remain so. This uncomfortable journey across the snow-bound landscape, which had stretched through twelve long hours and would stretch all through twelve more, to more than double normal limit, was destined, she felt sure, to take her into areas of new and fulsome opportunity—and opportunity, she was determined, would never need to make two knocks upon her door.

She had not much heart. The reflection, for example, that old Murfree had probably condemned himself to weird, half-dollar dinners for two weeks in order to secure for her her railway ticket and the privilege of riding in a sleeper did not fill her soul with gratitude. Instead she smiled maliciously as she considered him a victim of the restaurant which she

knew very well indeed and knew he hated. She almost resented the intrusion of the skirt-salesman with coffee, at this moment, for his coming interrupted visualization of old Murfree searching with disconsolate fork for rare chicken livers in the fifty-cent spaghetti.

The skirt-salesman told her of his "line" as she sipped the hot coffee.

"I got th' neatest little petticoat you ever seen yet in my 3B sample trunk," said he. "I'm going to get it out at Buffalo for you."

"But," sighed Bettina, tempering the sigh with smiles. "I'm not going on to Buffalo."

The salesman seemed depressed, then he seriously pondered. "Might I could get it from the baggage car already; this train ain't going none."

"How lovely if you could!" Bettina granted.

It took him a good hour to do this, for his No. 3B sample trunk was at the bottom of a pile, and when he went back to the sleeping car with the beruffled garment, Bettina was engrossed in conversation with the celebrated surgeon, who frowned upon the salesman as he handed her the petticoat. She gave its donor a rare smile and tucked the skirt into her bag; but that smile, as it left the salesman, swept the college boy into its orbit, and the college boy went after magazines. The surgeon was annoyed; but he did not rise and leave. He racked his brain for plans by means of which to utterly outshine the salesman and the college boy. He finally made purchases of candies.

Therefore, even if Bettina's toes were cold, she was

having a good time, which she felt certain was precursor of many good times in the future. Very definite ideas were in the small but shapely head of Miss Bettina Curtis, as the train poked slowly westward. She was a creature of her rearing, or her lack of it, and viewed life from the standpoint, half-furtive, half-aggressive, of the man or woman who turns naturally to tricks, ignorant of the manner or the joy of perfectly fair fighting for a worthy object.

If Bettina cared for any one it was for Theodore Sevigny, but her self-love was far greater than her love for Theodore, and perhaps she shrewdly estimated the composer when she assumed that his self-love was greater than the passion for her which he had so frequently assured her burned within his soul. But notwithstanding the plain limitations of her love for him, and notwithstanding the presumable limitations of his love for her, she did not in the least intend to live her life without him, and if she had him in her life it was as clear as day to her that some one other than himself would have to furnish funds; he never would be able to. That duty, all too clearly, would be hers.

She had no developed talents. But she was very beautiful of face, and more beautiful of form than face. Thus far in life's journey she had used these assets, meagerly reserving them for old Murfree, who observed and copied them on canvas, paying her for this great privilege (cold, despite its seeming intimacy) a small sum per hour. Not thus had the world's greatest beauties capitalized their charms. There was one way only to achieve her Theodore,

and that was to get money; there was one way to get money, and that was to get men.

Her experience with these men on the train assured her that she would not find this task too arduous when she began to operate in Belleville. Reflecting thus she laughed a full and throaty little laugh, a charming gurgle, which brought the celebrated surgeon, the skirt-salesman and the college boy quickly to attention. The Pullman car conductor, who was standing near, glared at them with wrath. The train conductor elbowed him aside. But company rules do not permit conductors, train or Pullman, to cut in with their flirtations in advance of amorous passengers. The public has some rights. The surgeon, the salesman and the college boy proceeded in their adoration of her, interrupted only by each other.

And thus the day passed with Bettina, who felt certain she was going to her fate, or part of it. The night was blank and comfortable, for she was a healthy animal. The morning dawned with three squires eager to buy breakfast for her in the dining-car, and the second day began—the first day of the glad New Year.

We may leave her, for the moment, very merry, turning from the wintry landscape, dimly seen through snow-flecked windows, to the surgeon, the skirt-salesman, the college-boy, or the conductors—all of whom were at her service.

In Belleville, at the house toward which she journeyed, the temperature was slightly higher, but the merriment was at a lower pressure. It was, indeed, almost with sorrow, surely it was with a very definite

gravity, that Anna Hoffman replaced the old year's calendar with a new one Beatrice had brought her as a Christmas gift (it was ornamented by a water-color from her own deft brush) and tore off the cover leaf of the small pad of days. The leaf beneath bore, in addition to the mystic "January 1," which so impresses all of us, a quotation, starting with an illuminated "I."

Anna looked at it with casual eyes—eyes heavy from a night which had included little sleep.

"I shall not pry into Time's closed book," she read, and her attention concentrated, "Whatever there may be in store for me of joy or sorrow, into Thy hands, O Lord, I lay my destiny."

She sighed.

The closed book of Time! Ah, when the past twelvemonth's leaves had opened they had revealed some unexpected and unwelcome passages! Would the year to come prove less fecund of threats, more prolific of bright realizations? It had torn her heart to say good-by to Beatrice, yet was she, really, sorry to have the dear girl go? It had indefinitely chilled her to learn that Harry was to leave Law School, yet she never favored law for him as a profession. She had always hoped that he would settle down in Belleville, taking up his father's business and marrying some nice Belleville girl. The scheme of things was working out in that direction, yet she was distressed by it. Ah, why? She knew.

She had been glad to have her daughter go back to the convent, she was reluctant at the thought of hav-

ing Harry there, at home, because of the great change which had occurred in Frederick Hoffman.

The New Year was beginning badly; how badly she could not yet prophesy.

She slowly went into the hall, secured her hat and great fur coat, and slowly went into the dining-room for Barbie's help with them, thinking deeply, and not brightly, every second. Barbie stood by the sideboard, counting silver, as she entered, and through an open window a veritable gale was blowing.

"What in the world, Barbie——"

"Oh, this old stove's been smoking. Getting cranky in its old age, Mrs. Hoffman."

Was that it? Was that what ailed Fred, and herself, and even Barbie, just as she had told him? Or was it—was it something far more dreadful?

An intense chill was in the air. She shivered, and her morbid reverie was broken.

"Whew, Barbie! Close the window, please; it's very cold. We're having a real blizzard. I'll have a time in getting over to Mrs. Miller's."

Barbie, after having closed the window, stood looking at her deprecatingly. "Oh, Mrs. Hoffman! You're not going out in all this storm!"

"Yes; I must. It's rather a serious case. Poor little woman!" Her face was most expressive when it mirrored sympathy. It showed as plain on it as mirth or sorrow could. There are such faces. "It's her first baby."

Barbie evidently had forgotten this emergency of a poor neighbor; when it was recalled to her she made

no further protest, but nodded understandingly and prepared to help her with her wraps.

"You know all about the dinner?"

"Yes, Mrs. Hoffman—of course." This was spoken almost with reproach.

"Be sure to give the turkey two full hours. Mr. Hoffman thought the last one was a little tough."

Barbie understood. No wonder if her mistress worried in these days of criticisms, grumblings, general dissatisfactions from the master of the house!

"Oh, the old gentleman's always kicking," she replied, presuming on her privileges, as she often did, with Anna. "Nothing suits him nowadays. For twenty-five years I did everything right, and now, all of a sudden, do what I can, from morning until night, he's always grumbling. And he hollers at me so!"

Anna looked at her a little puzzled as to whether or not she ought to scold her for her criticism of her husband. Her face, her little sigh, plainly told her mental processes when she decided that she need not do so.

"Barbie," she said slowly, "the trouble with us all is that we are getting old. Mr. Hoffman is, and so am I —and so are you."

"Well, suppose a body does forget a little!" Then, suddenly, Barbie was stricken with a light of memory. "Oh, Mrs. Hoffman, let me take your things away. I plain forgot to tell you that the doctor sent word over that you needn't go to Mrs. Miller's. Mrs. Valentine is going to stay with her. She used to be a trained nurse, didn't she? They're such nice young people!"

Anna shook her finger at her solemnly. "There! See? We're getting old!" She slowly doffed her hat and cloak and handed them to the old servant, moving somewhat wearily. "I realize it when I find myself so tired, so willing to shirk duty. I am worn out at the end of every day."

"And no wonder." Barbie spoke a little crossly, but there was a depth of real affection in her voice. "If you'd only spare yourself a little, instead of thinking of everybody else first—the old gentleman and Mr. Harry—and me, too, for that matter."

Anna sank into a chair, again sighing deeply. "I mean to take things much more easily when that young woman comes to help me. I expected a letter from her to-day, but from what Mr. Alston tells me, it is very likely that she's on her way here now."

Barbie's softness vanished. She was intensely jealous of this newcomer, even in advance of her arrival. "She needn't help *me,*" she declared. "Mrs. Hoffman, let me tell you now, this minute, I won't take any orders from that—person. Not me, Mrs. Hoffman! Not me!"

Anna smiled wearily at her, placating her. She had expected her to be a little bitter over what she would be certain to consider an invasion of her rights. "Don't let that worry you, Barbie. The young lady comes to assist me."

She emphasized the "lady" slightly so that there could be no error. She had not written for the girl because she wanted a new servant; she wanted a companion, some one to cheer and to talk to her. She had

"MRS. HOFFMAN, LET ME TELL YOU NOW, THIS MINUTE, I WON'T TAKE ANY ORDERS FROM THAT . . . PERSON." *p.* 110.

gained a wholly wrong idea of the sort of person who was on the way, because Alston had had a wrong idea given him by Murfree.

"No one shall interfere with your affairs," she promised Barbie, looking at her with real affection in her eyes, and smiling more fully as she saw the squat old woman, gray-haired, her lips set firmly in her absolute determination, one foot tapping the floor firmly beneath her stiffly starched and spreading calico, her eyes glaring into elevated space. "You old grumbler!"

"All right, so long's that's understood," said Barbie. She was making no concessions. "But, Mrs. Hoffman, we've managed to get along all these years. I believe in letting well enough alone." She shook her head, like an old bird of ill-omen with plumage of gray print. "Those puffed-up city girls—they're not much of a help." Then, a new thought occurring to her, after an instant's dissatisfied silence: "And, Mrs. Hoffman, you may be sorry, you may be sorry in particular, now that Mr. Harry is to stay at home!"

Anna smiled. Rising, she went to the sideboard, her fingers automatically seeking some employment, picked up a doily, folding it. As she placed it in a drawer, she looked at Barbie as if the crabbed servitor's final statement had been too silly to be seriously considered. "Barbie! Harry is not so empty-headed as all that!"

The pessimistic look with which the croaker met this made her definitely laugh.

"The young woman is not even in the house yet, and you have the whole romance done and ready to

serve!" She handed her the bunch of keys which was ever at her belt when she was considering household matters. "Get some preserves for dinner."

"Cherries?"

"Yes; and pears for Harry."

A ring at the front door announced a messenger with news that Mrs. Miller was, after all, in need of her.

"It is too bad that I've delayed. Will you help me with my wraps?"

Harry entered, whistling, while this process was in progress. He had come in from out-of-doors by the kitchen way, a habit born of prior years, when the kitchen way had meant doughnuts and other dainties held for him in sacred trust by Barbie. If he had seemed very much the elegant young gentleman, in his evening clothes, the night before, he now seemed as much the vital, sturdy and worthwhile young man, dressed for the fierce storm, as he was, in sweater and heavy jacket, with his trousers caught in sportsman's shoes, lacing nearly to the knee. Anna stopped to gaze at him with secret pride, pretending, meanwhile, to be buttoning her long seal coat, which Barbie had already buttoned—a mother's subterfuge.

"You aren't going out, mother, in such weather?" he exclaimed, solicitously.

"Yes; I'm going over to see Mrs. Miller."

He knew what was happening at the Miller house, and his voice hushed with the instant delicacy of a clean-souled youth when considering with innate reserve the woman's mysteries of such a time. His sub-

dued voice, as he answered, pleased Anna as much as his appearance did. How she worshiped him!

"Oh, yes. I see." He made no further protest. "I'll walk with you. The snow's knee-deep. You may need me to break the way."

"Oh——"

He smiled at her and stopped her protest. "I want to go down to the post-office, anyway." This brought back his sorrows of the night before, his disgust with Belleville. "No letters, no papers—in nearly two days!"

The mother's understanding caught quickly at what was in his mind. She deeply sympathized with him, but, inasmuch as his father had sent forth the ukase, she must not encourage him in his dissatisfaction. Criticism of Belleville was akin to an expression of dissatisfaction with the paternal plans.

"What can you expect in such a storm?" she said guardedly, as if she urged him to be fair to Belleville.

But he could not be fair to Belleville. His disappointment was too bitter and the wound too raw.

"Wouldn't this town kill you?" he exclaimed dejectedly. "If it snows for a couple of hours you're cut off from the world!" He dropped his eyes, abashed before her steady and reproachful gaze, then raised them, suddenly gazing full at her. "Mother, do you know what the boys at college call this place?"

"No, dear; what?"

" 'Good-night," said he explosively.

"Harry, it's our home. You will appreciate it more and more as you grow older."

"I know, but great heavens, mother! I can't help being young, and it's no place for a *young* fellow!"

She moved, as if, perhaps, to delay going until this matter had been talked out, once for all. It was hard for her—this listening to his protests. Possibly, she felt more keenly than he did himself, the tragedy of making him give up his Law School and settle down to humdrum study of his father's factory, its output and the distribution of the wares. "Dear!" she said, half in reproach, half in keen sympathy.

He was quick to catch the slight note of distress and instantly endeavored to absolve her of responsibility and show her that he could look on the situation's bright side.

"In the summer it's all right. There's good golf, some pretty girls at the Country Club and a chance to run down to Buffalo to see a ball game, now and then. But in the winter! Oh, it's so dead lonesome! Can't do a thing! And writing out inventories and looking after a million dull things in the factories is going to get on my nerves."

A moment's pause, while she was striving to find words and he was glooming at the carpet, was followed by an instant's burst of hopefulness on his part.

"Say, mother," he demanded eagerly, "don't you think father might let me have a few weeks in New York before I—settle down? Can't you work it for me?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Harry."

He threw himself into a chair. "Just think—almost all my friends are there! I don't especially know these

chaps in Belleville. I don't say they're not all right, but—you know, mother! And as for Belleville girls —and think of the fellows at the Law School, now—getting back to work in the old hall, while I mope here beside the stove! And no more hops!"

She shook her head, almost discouraged. "How like your father! But, Harry, we have very nice entertainments here, too. There is a concert and dance at Masonic Hall on Saturday evening, and——"

He rose, protesting. "I'll stake you to it, mother. Do you think I'd put on a dress suit for the Belleville —cream of society? What a chance!"

She saw the plain futility of arguing with him and gave it up. "Come, Harry, a little walk will do you good."

"Anything for movement—even if it's walking." He tucked the scarf in close about her neck. "I don't blame you, mother. Where's father?"

"He has come in. I think he's taking a nap."

"That's all you *can* do here—sleep. There's a chance that you may dream. Mother, this sameness here will kill me!"

The mingled tragedy and comedy in the boy's manner, its fretful childishness, in contrast to his manly stature, made her smile and broke the growing tension.

"Come along, you big boy!" She drew him to her and ran her fingers through his hair. "I'm sure you will enjoy the dance." She smiled at him. "And there's Dorothy, you know!"

He nodded with approval. "Yes, she's—all—right, Dorothy Mason! Isn't she a wonder?"

Anna was delighted. "And she's the heiress of the Senator, you know! Senator Stevenson is one of the richest men in this part of the state, and one of the most distinguished men in Congress."

Harry made a gesture of mock fright. "*He* won't be at the dance, will he?"

"Come on, Harry—and if he were to be, you know you'd have a better time because of it. The Senator is full of fun."

"And seventy—that's the age of most of Belleville's fun! I tell you, mother, a man can stand almost anything that comes along in life, but when it happens to be one of those Belleville dancing affairs—brrrr!—not—for—muh! Well, there's no use kicking, I suppose. Come along!" He started toward the hall door just as that which opened to the library swung open. "Hurry! Here comes father!" With a look of apprehension, half in earnest, half in fun, he hastened from the room.

Anna turned to greet her husband. "You up already?"

His sleep evidently had not cheered his temper. "Already!" he snapped sharply. "Why already? How long did you think I'd sleep? Haven't slept, anyway. Barbie throws the dishes around like mad. No one could sleep through such a noise."

Anna offered no defense of Barbie, did not criticize her husband for his temper, did not yield to him. She merely looked at him kindly, tolerantly, not in the least astonished. "Well, well, I'll have to speak to her."

The day was waning and the falling snow, outside, had dimmed the light a little further. It was not dark

within the room, but the daylight was not brilliant. "Why don't she turn on the lights?" he snapped.

"It is still daylight."

"Daylight?" he snarled, as he went across the room toward his small smokers' table. "Call this daylight? I call it pitch dark!"

Anna went calmly to the door. "Come, Barbie," she called. "Turn on the lights."

"Do you want me to turn the light on now—before it's dark?" said Barbie, coming in, astonished.

"*Yes!*" said Hoffman angrily. Then, seeing on his wife's face an expression of reproach, he added: "If you *please!*"

Barbie was distressed and fluttered helplessly. "Mr. Hoffman hollers at me so!" she cried, upon the verge of tears.

"What more can I say than 'if you please?'" the master of the house demanded.

After one frightened look at him Barbie hurried out to turn the switch.

Anna went to her husband—slowly, calmly, not at all upset. Perhaps it would have been more soothing to the rasped man's temper had she shown some tendency to worry as a tribute to it.

"You are not in a very good humor," she suggested. "What has vexed you, Fred?"

He stood glooming, silent.

"Have you had trouble at the factory?"

"No," said he, as finally the lights flashed on.

She made no further reference to his outburst, but stood a moment looking at him puzzled. "I should like to go over to Mrs. Miller. She may need me."

He turned nervously on her. "Well, if you'd like to go, why not go?"

"Perhaps you'd rather I stayed here."

He made a gesture of impatience. "It makes no difference to me, one way or the other." Then, as Anna started toward the door, he shot a nervous glance about the room. "Of course she has forgotten to draw the curtains!" He made a step or two toward the door which led into the dining-room. "Barbie! Barbie!"

"Never mind—I'll do it," Anna urged him, and pulled down the shades and closed the hangings.

"She forgets everything lately!" Hoffman grumbled. He found a cigar and lighted it, while Anna lingered at the door, apparently not worried, but much puzzled.

"Has Valentine come?" he asked her.

"No; but he surely will," she answered soothingly.

"I didn't ask you if he surely would; I asked you if he'd come."

"No; he's not been here."

"Did Beatrice send a telegram?"

"None has come. But the wires are very likely down, you know, Fred. Such a storm——"

"A nice fix to be in! Not even a newspaper! The whole world might have come to an end and we'd know nothing of it!"

"They'll have things opened by to-morrow. This is most unusual. We'll get everything, letters, papers, telegrams, to-morrow. I've been anxious to hear something from that young woman Mr. Alston found for me."

This apparently was a sore spot with him. "Was it necessary—really necessary—to burden yourself with a companion?"

"Not necessary, possibly, but wise, I'm sure. I'm not as young and strong as I used to be, Fred, and there's really too much in this big place for me to look after. I shall be glad to have some one to assist me, at least till Beatrice has finished school and can stay here at home."

"Well, I don't care, as far as I'm concerned," he said, indifferently. "You can engage ten 'companions,' if you like. As for Beatrice—you needn't count on her for much assistance! I wish I'd asked her—I'll bet that in the year she's been away she's forgotten what a kitchen looks like! Did she go out to the kitchen once while she was home?"

"I don't remember, Fred. I am sure I would have much preferred to keep my girl at home and not send her off to school. You thought it best, as well as I, you know. And things here would have been dull for her. The young woman Mr. Alston found for me comes with good recommendations. She will be a companion for Beatrice when she comes home again as well as an assistance to me. Harry, too, is feeling rather badly. It has made him gloomy to give up his Law School. He's lonesome and—dejected."

"Oh, yes, of course!" her husband said sarcastically. "The—young—*gentleman!* In the summer it suits his taste well enough to be here; but in the winter—oh, then he prefers New York!"

"It came rather suddenly to him, Fred. He says

there are a lot of loose ends there that he would like to straighten up."

"Debts?" Hoffman's voice was instantly suspicious.

"Oh, Fred! Harry? You know better! Social things. He makes friends so swiftly. He'd like to say good-by to them. Perhaps you'd let him go down for a week or two——"

"Not for a day! He'll have to get used to Belleville life. He can make friends here, as we have done. I had to get used to Belleville, didn't I? I didn't even finish college, did I?"

Anna looked at him without comment. The bell rang and she went to the window, looking out. "Mr. Valentine has come."

"At last he shows up!"

With a helpless gesture Anna left the room. She said nothing when she found Harry waiting in the hall. She could scarcely blame the boy for wishing to avoid his father.

In the meantime the young manager went in, somewhat timidly. Hoffman turned to him less grouchily, but with little greeting in his "How do you do, Valentine?" And he gave him not the slightest New Year greeting.

"How do you do, Mr. Hoffman?"

"Did you finish up those statements?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me see them." As he took them he waved the young man to a chair, but did not look at him. His eyes were on the papers.

Barbie came in with a tray on which a claret-bottle

stood. She liked Mr. Valentine and was afraid that Hoffman would forget his hospitality. He would have had she not attracted his attention to his duties as a host.

Noting her reminder he glanced at her somewhat resentfully, but accepted the hint with reasonable grace.

But there were no glasses on the tray. *"Glasses! . . .* If you please!" he snapped.

She started violently. "Well, can't a body be a little forgetful once in a while?" she said in desperation. She found the glasses on the sideboard and put them on the tray. "I never——"

"Don't annoy me," Hoffman snarled at her.

She was very nervous. "Yes, sir—I mean no, sir."

He paid no attention to her. "Have a drink, Valentine?"

"Thank you." The young man took the glass of claret, but did not lift it to his lips. He was evidently worried. He watched Hoffman's face with nervous eyes.

Hoffman did not look at him. He was studying the papers. "What an awful statement! Simply awful! The worst I ever saw."

Valentine made no direct reply, but held his glass up. "My best wishes for the new year, Mr. Hoffman!"

"That has nothing to do with this statement," his employer answered grumpily, and Valentine put down his glass again, the wine in it untasted.

"Sales ten per cent. short of last month's," con-

tinued his employer. "Expenses seven per cent. greater!"

"Trade is always dull during the holidays," said the manager apologetically.

"Last year we managed to keep up the average."

"But times are hard just now, Mr. Hoffman."

"I am looking for results, not for excuses!" His employer rapped the table with his knuckles. "I've relied too much on you, that's been the trouble. You'll have Harry now to help you. I guess he's needed—if he proves to be of any use."

"We'll do our best, sir. Of course, no one can ever be to the business what you are, Mr. Hoffman. We ——"

"That is no consolation. I am getting tired, Valentine. You must take hold and accomplish things. And I want you to see that Harry fits himself to step into my shoes." Again he rapped the table almost angrily, as if he fancied that the task of fitting Harry to be useful would be difficult.

"I've had some success, as you know——"

"Yes, but you don't keep at it. The trouble with you young fellows, the trouble with this whole generation, is that you haven't had the old-fashioned training. There was my father. Look back at him! He came over to this country with just two strong arms, a sound body and a good brain, but he worked—worked hard! He worked until his business had spread over the whole state. But all that did not give him the idea of making life easy for me. He took me out of college at nineteen and made me

learn the business from the ground up. He gave me plenty of work—and ten dollars a week! You—and that young gentleman son of mine—with your modern ideas!"

Valentine was squirming most uncomfortably. He was glad that Harry was to stay at home and help. He felt that his employer's constant dissatisfaction was getting beyond him. "Well, sir——"

As he had not the least idea what he possibly could say to stem the flood, he was glad that at that moment the bell rang.

Hoffman, distracted from his criticism, turned sharply toward the door. "Is that someone for me? . . . Barbie! Barbie!"

The grateful Valentine went to the window and looked out to the porch. "It's Mr. Alston, sir."

Hoffman was appeased. "Well, that's good of him! To come here in this storm!"

Barbie had reached the door and Alston entered, rubbing his cold hands. "Brrrrr! A regular blizzard! You can't see five yards in front of you. Hello, Fred."

Hoffman went to him with outstretched hands, genuinely pleased. "Hello, Alston. How's my distinguished friend and attorney? Get that muffler off."

Barbara was standing, smiling, ready to receive it. Plainly Alston was a favorite with her.

"Well, now; thank you, Miss Barbara," he said merrily, as he passed it to her keeping.

" 'Miss Barbara!' Oh, Mr. Alston!"

"I mean Barbie."

She smiled at him and went off with the muffler and his coat and cap.

Hoffman poured a glass of wine. "Here, have some claret. It'll warm you up. It's good—1904."

Alston nodded and then turned to Valentine. "Mr. Valentine, how do you do?"

"Fine, thank you, Mr. Alston," said the much-relieved young man. Then, with a glance of his employer: "I think I must be going."

"All right, Valentine," Hoffman consented, cheerily, and handed him the glass, which the worried youth had not had the heart to touch his lips to. "Here, finish up your drink."

"Thank you. Mr. Alston—Mr. Hoffman—a happy New Year to you!"

Within a moment he had bowed himself away, feeling that, by going, he might be dodging dire disaster.

Hoffman found cigars and offered them to Alston.

"Thanks," said the lawyer. "I thought I'd just run over for a little visit. Felt like seeing you before the first day of the new year passed—both of you!"

"Too bad Anna isn't here—but some woman's having her first baby and she's gone to see what can be done. You'll stay for dinner, though?"

"No; sorry, but I can't."

"Why not?"

"A New Year's night party at the Bachelors' Club."

"From which you should have resigned long ago."

"Perhaps," said Alston, making himself comfortable, "but it's too late now. No woman I would

want would have me, and the ones who'd have me I don't want. There you are!" He settled comfortably into the easy chair. "Fred, it's about time that we realized we're no longer spring chickens—you and I."

"You're right, Alston. It is sad but true. Why, only last year they still called me 'Mr. Hoffman,' but the minute word was passed around that Harry was to stay at home, why, I became the 'old gentleman.' I heard it twice this morning. It sent me home to take a nap—to sleep it off." He took his cigar from between his lips and looked at it reflectively. "Ah, Alston—it *hurts!*"

Alston nodded. "I hope Harry will do well."

"Oh, he'll do well enough. He's young, and, naturally, he'll find things dull here. But he'll settle down—as I did—and some day he'll fill my place."

"It's a worthy ambition—a leading citizen of the state to whom we all point with pride."

"Oh, I don't know," said his old friend, smiling with satisfaction—as a cat purrs under stroking. "I was brought up to do the things I had to do—and to do them well. I've tried. I'm a little rough, perhaps—impulsive. I've always been a man of impulse, and——" he looked up briskly, with firm self-assurance, "experience has taught me that my impulses are—generally—right. It's *always* so. So once my mind is made up, I see it through to the end. But I was very much like Harry at his age. I, too, thought I could never stand the sameness of it here. I wanted to go out into the world and do great things. But

—I was chained here, first by my father, then by my business, then by—my wife."

"She should have consoled you, Fred."

"Well, you know how young I was when we were married. It was my father's wish."

For the first time Alston sensed that there were in the conversation hints that Hoffman had not really been happy, a hint, even, that he had not found in married life just what he had looked forward to, or, at least, hoped for. "Fred!" he said reproachfully.

Hoffman was quick to feel the veiled reproof. "Oh, I don't mean to say a word against my wife. She is really—the best. Why, Alston, when I read about some of the women, nowadays—their whims, their fancies and caprices—and, above all, their extravagance—and then look at Anna, always the same, calm, practical, careful——"

"Sounds like a servant's recommendation," Alston commented dryly.

"Well, now—you know what I mean. Oh, we get on well enough together. Years of association, habit—they'll do much, you know, Alston. And the children. There's the strongest tie of all."

"Of course."

"But there are times, Alston——"

Alston was a little shocked, indefinitely, but perceptibly. He hastened with an interruption, which might mean much or nothing.

"Luckily, Fred, you've never had much time to squander."

Was it that Alston thought that if he had had more time he might have been less happy, even than he now seemed willing to admit? Or was it that he thought that if he had had more time to squander, feeling as he did, he might have put that time to questionable use?

Hoffman did not catch the point at all. "No, you're right there," he went on. "Work, nothing but work, all *my* life. Ever since I left college—and I left in my junior year. Remember?"

"Yes; in your junior year." This brought reminiscence into Alston's mind. "My, my! How sorry all the fellows were to see you go!" He smiled fondly. "We certainly did love our big, kind-hearted Fritzie! You *were* kind-hearted in those days, Fred."

If there, again, criticism lay veiled and hidden, Hoffman did not catch it, and Alston hurried on:

"Fritzie! You remember? Everybody called you 'Fritzie.' "

Hoffman nodded, real smiles on his face now—not merry possibly, but comfortable, pleasant, thoughtful of old days, old joys.

"How time flies! It seems like yesterday . . . the boys going down to the station with me . . . you, Harry Black——"

"And 'Skinny!' You remember 'Skinny?' "

Hoffman laughed aloud. "Yes; Charlie Williams. All good fellows! I can see the train as it pulled in—the train I was to go away on! We shook hands and" (his voice softened) "I never saw most of them again."

The present had no power to draw up from his heart into his eyes such sentiment as had the olden days—that was plain.

"And say, Alston," he went on, "when they started in to sing—for the first time in my life—I cried!"

Alston nodded and the tears came to his eyes. It was the sentiment in him, perhaps, which had made him a good jury-lawyer. Smiling through the rising mist he softly hummed the old, dear song:

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And the days of auld lang syne."

In the middle of the verse Fred joined him, singing second, as he had in college. His voice was resonant, and the chords were true college glee-club harmony. It made both men smile with rare enjoyment; and it brought tears, now, to Fred's, as well as Alston's eyes.

"Ah, those were the happy days of our youth," said Alston.

"For a few years after they were over," Hoffman granted, "I suffered tortures here, but I have gradually grown calm—resigned." He rose, somewhat nervously, wholly needlessly, and re-arranged a chair or two. "And now," he said, in a full voice and with a wry face, turning again to Alston, "I am the 'old gentleman.' Harry, I suppose, will have to sow his wild oats while he is the 'young' one, but, after

all, the sooner he, too, marries and settles down, the better it will be for him, of course."

"May he fare as well as you did, Fred," said Alston, with real feeling, and, raising his glass slowly, drank to this wish—this wish which he considered the best of all that he could offer the young son of his old friend.

"I hope so," Hoffman answered somewhat dully.

"In the meantime I will propose him at the Bachelors' Club," said Alston, laughing. "That will fit him for all that's coming to him." He raised his glass again. "For the new year! I drink—to a happy and a graceful old age!"

Hoffman touched his glass to his, but did not at all endorse the toast. "May it be a long way off!" he said instead. "Here's to you!"

When the glasses were again upon the table, Alston held out his hand and his host gripped it. "May we always be the same old friends, Fred—you and I."

"You—and—I."

After a long, strong pressure, the lawyer started toward the door. "Well, I must be off. My best regards to your wife. Also to the—'young gentleman.'"

"I hope you'll have a good time, to-night, Alston, but I'd rather you'd stay here and play me a few games of poker—or—pinochle—anything you like."

"No; I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm ashamed to take the money." He laughed heartily at his old joke. "Happy New Year, Fred!"

Crying "Same to you, and many of them," Hoffman followed him to the door and closed it after him.

The geniality which his face had shown while Alston had been there fell from it, mask-like, as soon as he had gone. Returning to the library he frowned stormily above the statements Valentine had brought.

"Such management!" he growled at length. "Decrease, decrease! What an awful statement! The worst I've ever seen."

He paced the room excitedly. The consciousness was in him that he was blaming Valentine for conditions of the trade, that his wrath was rising against Harry in advance, on the assumption that he would not take good hold of the business; but he did not swing his mind into more reasonable channels. Instead, he let his spleen accumulate and found a certain joy in it. It was ready for the most elaborate explosion of the day when Barbie entered, after there had been another ring at the front door, but her manner was mysterious and ominous.

"Mr. Hoffman, Mr. Hoffman!" she mysteriously hissed, her face plainly showing her excitement.

"What's the matter?"

"She's here."

"Who's here?"

Barbie, quivering with jealous wrath, found words difficult. "That—young woman!" There was the force and meaning of an expletive in the two innocent words. "That Miss——"

"Oh, my wife's aide-de-camp."

"If that's what they call 'em. Anyway—she's here."

"How did she get here? No one has been to the station."

"She says she wrote a letter from New York day before yesterday saying she'd be here last night. But she was snowed in—'most froze." There was a hint of exultation in the twist which Barbie gave these words—a twist of exultation because the interloper had so suffered, and a hint of disappointment because she had survived the suffering. "She says she wrote."

"Very likely. We've had no mail for two days."

"Walked from the station—through snow half way to her waist, she says." Again the hint of exultation. "What shall I do with her?"

The question angered Hoffman. "Do with her? What do I know about it? I suppose my wife has assigned her a room somewhere in the house."

Barbie was quite helpless. "But there's no fire in it!"

This was too much. Hoffman whirled on her. "Shall I make the fire? You've been in the house twenty-five years and don't know what to do! What do you want of me?"

Barbie, in that terror with which Hoffman's tantrums always filled her, looked at him and gasped. Finally she managed to articulate: "I only wanted to ask if—if she can't wait in here, while——"

Hoffman turned away disgustedly. "Oh, don't bother me!"

Barbie's face was twisting, making ready for a burst of nervous tears. Of all things he could endure that with least complacence, so he yielded.

"Let her come in."

Barbie for the moment was incapable of movement, for he had roared permission at her as if she had been deaf.

"Well?" he exclaimed, in desperate exasperation. "What are you standing around for? You may bring her in, I said."

Now the flurried woman's tears came. Here was a fine beginning of the new young woman's stay! How she hated her. "On account of that—that thing—I have to be hollered at again!" she moaned and went to get her.

Really rather cold, and possibly somewhat dismayed, although that might have been questioned by those who knew her best, Bettina, in the hall, had heard part of the dialogue. As Barbie returned to her she accelerated her shivering, merely as a matter of general policy. To play for sympathy is always a safe game for women. It won, even with the worried Barbie.

"You're cold, ain't you? I'll make you a cup of tea." She motioned to the library. "You can go right in there for a while. I'll make a fire up in your room."

"Thank you," said Bettina gently.

"You heard him hollering?" said Barbie confidentially. "That's Mr. Hoffman—the old gentleman. He's got an awful temper. But you can wait in there with him."

Bettina nodded and moved slowly toward the door. "In there?"

"Uh-huh. He probably won't say much to you till he knows you better. When you know him as well as I do—then—he'll talk—and when he does—look out! And poor Mrs. Hoffman——"

"Shall I go in?" Bettina shivered yet more earnestly.

"Yes; I'll hurry up your tea."

With that, unable to endure the thought of waiting to see what would happen, Barbie hurried toward the kitchen.

Then Bettina, slowly, diffidently, as a maiden terrified by venturing in new, repellent worlds went in.

Hoffman was standing by his desk examining some papers, but he looked toward her with sullen curiosity, offering no greeting.

She waited, plainly expecting some sort of a welcome, and made a picture of affrighted diffidence as she did so. It had no effect on him, except to make him look away, but he glanced up at the end of a short interval. She nodded the second time.

"I am Bettina Curtis," she now ventured in a thin, small, panic-stricken voice.

CHAPTER VI

Hoffman looked at her askance, and growled, rather than replied in words. He disapproved of this idea of his wife's. Heavens! Anna would soon have a pay-roll as long as his down at the factory! The house would be a mere hotel for servants and companions, hired at fancy prices to do what it seemed to him required but little effort! A "companion!" What did Anna want of a companion? Had he not been enough companion for her all these years? What would she think of him if he engaged some New York youth to come to Belleville and draw wages as "companion" to him? What would he do with such a young man if one came? Knock him in the head and send for someone to come for the remains, he thought. Of all the mad ideas——

"I am Bettina Curtis" the plainly very timid girl, repeated.

He nodded curtly. "Glad to see you."

His voice was a mere growl. He did not more than look at her.

He hoped she didn't mind tobacco smoke—ah, there it was! With a hired person of the class to which she evidently belonged—for her modest, quite well made clothes, extremely pretty face and somewhat refined manner had made him place her, instantly, outside the realm of servantdom—one never would

feel free to do as one felt most like doing. It would be a fine arrangement to pay a salary to someone who would act as a restraint upon him in his own house!

Bettina, after ne had turned away, stood in an attitude as near to one of consternation and impending flight as was possible to her, nor was this wholly histrionic.

Apparently, he was even grumpier than old Murfree, plainly Barbie's warnings were quite justified, and she was far away from Theodore, and wet, and very tired.

She was not afraid of this fine looking, but irascible old gentleman, but she was doubtful of the wisdom of the effort she had undertaken, or, if not doubtful of its wisdom, at least doubtful of the fun of it. Of course, she knew that she could handle this old man in time; the idea that a little-city resident—a gray-haired little-city resident, at that—could persistently flout her was too absurd—rather! But it would be tiresome work. And if his ideas and fortune were as dowdy as this comfortable old house seemed to her city eyes, whose conception of true elegance had been born of the New York shop windows, hotel lobbies, restaurant interiors and a few fine flats, into which by chance she had adventured, she rather thought old Murfree must have been insane when he told her that the man was rich.

Still—hadn't Murfree said there was a son?

At any rate, if she was to remain there, this ancient party must be taught to treat her very differently,

and she thought she knew the way to do that. She had tried it on her stepfather, on Theodore and on divers other males of her acquaintance with success. It had failed with Murfree, but with him alone, and he was very wise. Murfree had learned women on the "other side," in Paris; he had taken a post-graduate course in New York City, a course of twenty years' duration—and this countryman, of course, was not to be compared to him. She believed the simplest ruse would bring this man to terms—a ruse which she had tried on Murfree, more than once, with no success whatever. And she rather felt like crying, anyway.

After a marked pause, devoted to reproachful, frightened looks towards him, she sank suddenly upon a chair close by the stove (she really was very chilled) and began to sob convulsively. They were not imitation sobs. There were in her enough discomfort from the cold, weariness from the long journey, nervousness born of the strangeness of these entirely uncongenial and, to her bizarre surroundings, to make her sobs quite genuine.

Hoffman, dumfounded at first, looked at her with annoyance and then yielded to that combination of disgust and distress which every man must feel when a pretty woman starts to weep when he is by.

"What's the matter, Miss?" His tone was not unkindly.

Her answer came reluctantly through choking sobs. It was almost inarticulate. "I feel—so miserable!" she gasped jerkily.

"What's that?" said he.

"I—feel so—miserable!" The girl's sobs redoubled.

He did not know what to do. Here was a weapon Anna never once had used against him.

As a matter of fact, Anna never had used any weapon against him. Since the habit of his churlishness had fastened itself on him, she had met it with a growing calm, amounting, in the end, not to indifference, precisely, but to that tolerance with which a cripple, for example, bears his lameness—as something so inevitable that discussion of it, battling against it, would be futile. She had not shed a tear—so far as he knew.

He would have gasped in wonder had he suddenly been made cognizant of the sleepless nights which she had spent because of his unkindness and indifference, of the long hours which she had passed upon her knees, praying to that God whom he acknowledged, but did not really conceive, of the puzzled, desperate days of striving, ever with indifferent success, to meet his wishes and so bring back to their home the old Fred, who had vanished with such a gradual disappearance that the new Fred did not know that he had a predecessor differing from himself. Perhaps he would have pitied, perhaps he would changed. Perhaps . . . but speculation is so idle in regard to these domestic metamorphoses.

He was exceedingly annoyed and the sobbing maiden did not answer, further than to state her misery. And her sobs had told of that already.

"Are you ill?" he asked, and then, remembering crudely some hint of woman's wiles which had come to him from the outside world, never from his patient wife: "Are you ill, or are you—hurt?"

He even went to her and paused quite close to her spasmodic shoulders. Indefinitely he had meant to show this interloper—interloper, though she had been bidden—what her true position was; he had not definitely meant to make her weep, for he had surely not intended to make himself uncomfortable, and this tearful outburst did, somehow.

Between her sobs she answered, broken-heartedly: "Oh, sir, when one has to leave home and go among strangers—to earn a living—and—and is given not one friendly word—is offered no warm hand of welcome—oh—oh——"

He was both exasperated and a little terrified. What if Barbie, or his wife, or Harry, should come in and find the poor girl weeping into her wadded handkerchief, as the result of his first words!

"Well, well, you must not give way like this." He did not wish to seem a brute—to any stranger.

She looked up at him with what she definitely meant to make effective eyes. "But, sir," she said piteously, "it is all so hard!—so hard for a poor girl!"

Inasmuch as he said nothing, she burst into new storms of tears and sobs.

"Miss," he urged at this, his tone betraying his anxiety, "will you *please* stop crying?" She made no reply and he went on, explanatorily: "You'll not have a bad time with us. My wife is—goodness, itself, and I—I'm not a—cannibal."

This was what she had been waiting for, if not definitely, then sub-consciously; the first sign of weakening upon the part of this man who must be early conquered if she hoped to carry out the little plan of action which was outlined in her mind. Now, having mildly humbled him, she must placate him; she must enlist him on her side to serve in her behalf, should battles come with others.

"I believe you, sir," she murmured gratefully. Her eyes went up to his with a sudden and pathetic gaze which almost startled him.

He had not previously noted what large eyes they were. He knew of no eyes like them in all Belleville. Surely they were very different from Anna's. He found them curiously attractive.

And they looked straight into his own. Furthermore they made a careful note of what they saw when they thus gazed, for her reply was augmented by the quite unexpected comment: "You have such good eyes!"

While he stood nonplussed by these unexpected tactics, she was stricken with a sudden inspiration. What shrewdness was it in her woman's soul which read his man's soul with such accuracy as to discover in it vanity of personal appearance? Not a resident of Belleville would have endorsed her estimate, made thus upon the moment's spur.

"But the *old* gentleman," said she. "Is he hard to get along with?"

At first he was not won by this thin subterfuge. At first it angered him. Somewhat worried by the unexpected problem which had thrust itself upon him,

feeling the need of some slight stimulant, he had stepped to the sideboard and poured himself a glass of claret, after she had said his eyes were "good." Now he turned and looked at her investigatively. If she was making game of him! . . .

But Bettina's tear-dewed eyes were innocent of guile—he thought. Big, lustrous and appealing, they gazed at him with real query in them. Truly the girl did not conceive that he, himself, was the "old gentleman!" He set down the glass of claret and turned fully toward her, considering her with new approval.

" 'The old gentleman?' " he quoted, wishing to make certain he had heard aright.

"Yes," said she with lightning thought. "I have been already warned that no one can do things right for him. I'm dreadfully afraid of him."

Now he was thoroughly aroused. "And what frightful stories have you heard of the 'old gentleman?' " he asked, nonplussed and suspicious—but impressed.

She hastened to administer some slightly soothing words. "Nothing exactly frightful," she admitted, "only that he is always in such bad humor—excitable—and shouting at everybody." She paused to let this take effect. "And I am not accustomed to that," she went on briskly, lying wonderfully. "Papa and mamma have always been so good to me!"

"Papa," lurking, at that moment, in a saloon's back room in Jersey City, where he had flown, after an angry session with his wife because this sweet girl

had departed without consulting him, or arranging to send back her wages to him, would have been especially amazed to hear this from her lips. Even "Mamma" might have been a little startled, although their battles had been less pronounced. They quarreled with each other, but together stood firmly against the balance of the world.

But Hoffman was impressed. Had he really been so brutal? "Come, come, Miss," he exclaimed, almost apologetically. "It won't do to be so—so absurdly sensitive. We must take people as we find them. The —'old gentleman'—may be a little rough—that is his nature. But—why, he's not a bad sort at heart. You can take my word for it."

"Really?" said she, as if much relieved.

She did not feel at all like laughing in his face because she had so easily fooled him; she was interested in her art—absorbed in the delicate bit of acting, the fineness upon which she was skilfully engaged.

"Yes, really," said he. "I know, for—er—*I* am the 'old gentleman!' "

She rose and stared at him incredulously, her large eyes fully opened, wonderingly. "Oh, no!" she protested as if the thing was unbelievable.

"Oh, yes," said he, convinced that she was very genuine, and now that he believed this, very pleased that she had not identified him with the aged.

She stood, stammering as with astonishment and fright. Her manner said, as plain as words could: "What if he is angry because I have repeated such

wild gossip?" Her lips said: "How can that be? You are not a bit old?"

His satisfaction was increasing. Plainly she was most intelligent. Perhaps Anna had not erred so greatly after all in sending for her.

"Thank you for the compliment," he said, now very genially. "But I have a son and he is the—*young* gentleman. Obviously, therefore, I am the *old* one."

"Oh, how funny!" she exclaimed, bursting into that extraordinarily captivating laugh of hers. "And I said such terrible things about you!"

"Oh, I don't mind that," he reassured.

Now she spoke very prettily. "Won't you forgive me, please?" Looking straight into his eyes with a petitioning smile upon her lips she stood a second and then advanced with hand outstretched as if to call a truce and cement friendship.

He scarcely knew just what to do. There was about him somewhere the uncomfortable feeling that he was being managed, and he hated that; but in her eyes there was no trace of guile. After an instant's hesitation he took the outstretched hand—somewhat awkwardly and foolishly, but took it.

"I will," said he, and made a further and a great concession by inquiring graciously: "But why haven't you taken off your hat and coat?"

"Because nobody has asked me." Her voice was full of soft reproach.

"I'm really as polite as a bear!"

This, for him, was an amazing venture toward apology, and, as she removed her heavy coat and her

large hat, he took them from her. The manner in which he tossed them to a chair revealed the fact that he was unaccustomed to the performance of such small services for women.

She moved to the stove with hands outstretched. The fire had died down in it and it threw off little heat, although the room was comfortably warm. He noted this and fumed.

"Barbie has forgotten again to look after the stove!" he cried complainingly, and moved toward the hall as if to call.

This, for some reason, he did not do. Instead he turned back to the stove and set to work. Was it that he did not wish the entrance of old Barbie to interrupt this interview just yet? "I'll attend to it myself."

Her attention drawn to it by his brief, effective work about it, she commented on it—as well she might, for it was one of those rare articles, in the United States, a German stove of porcelain. "What a fascinating old stove!"

"My father, when he built this house, had it built as they build them in Germany; he loved old country customs."

As he threw in wood and arranged drafts, she moved about the room, and in one corner, stopped, really attracted and astonished. There was fixed a strange, old shrine—a shelf of brass, upholding a sweet Virgin, with her child, and sconces upon either side. "How very quaint!"

He rose from his prostration at the stove and

moved toward her. "Almost everything here is just as my parents left it. Sometimes I've thought of tearing the old house down and putting up a new one, but my wife likes it as it is."

"Mrs. Hoffman is old-fashioned? That is, prefers the old ideas?"

"Yes," he said, not with complete approval. Then, wondering himself at his unusual graciousness: "I hope you'll soon feel at home with us."

She surely was a most unusual young woman, and a person of good sense. She had instantly given him the feeling that she judged him at his true worth, and at the same time had impressed him with the thought that he had recently been sadly underestimated, there in his own home.

"I hope so," she replied, smiling charmingly and falling into one of her best attitudes. She knew the attitudes; experience on the model's throne teaches values in such matters.

He was additionally impressed. "As you stand there," said he, "you remind me of a painting."

"Oh, yes; I know; I've often been told that." For a moment her heart thumped. Was he struggling to remember some startling study Murfree had made of her? If he was, and should identify her as a model, what——"

"Let me see," said he, trying to remember.

She was really rather nervous. She did not wish him to remember. "And you," said she, a little hurriedly, aiming to distract his mind. "You have such a strong face!" She tilted her own countenance, as

if examining him critically. "Really a classic head."

It was fulsome, crude, but yet it carried. "You flatter me."

"Oh, indeed you have!" Her insistence was emphatic, for she saw that he was not disgusted, but impressed. It gave her courage and her feet were wet. She stamped one upon the floor. "If I could only take my wet shoes off——"

He seemed concerned at once. "Are your shoes wet?"

"Of course they are." She smiled as if suggesting something to him. If he yielded then would she feel certain she had wholly conquered in the battle with which he had greeted her. "I walked for nearly an hour in all that snow. There wasn't a sleigh, or a conveyance of any kind in sight. The ticket agent directed me here, but I missed my way."

"We'll send for your baggage the first thing in the morning. But you mustn't keep those wet shoes on. You might catch your death of cold." He was really concerned. When had he worried over Anna's dampened feet! "I'll get you a pair of my wife's slippers." He smiled at her—Frederick Hoffman actually smiled at this invader whom his wife had invited so absurdly (as he had declared) to share their home. "Can't let you risk your health on the first day you are here."

With that he hurried into his wife's sewing-room, which opened from the library.

Barbara, while he was absent, brought a tray with tea and crackers, which she set down somewhat grimly.

"Here's your tea, Miss." Then, not seeing Hoffman: "The old gentleman's not here?" She smiled wisely. "Ah, I thought he would—skip out!" She looked with slightly greater favor on the newcomer. "Help yourself, Miss. There's a good fire in your room, now, and you can go up." As an afterthought she started toward the stove. "Might as well look after this one while I'm here."

"Mr. Hoffman attended to it," Bettina told her quietly.

"Attended to it? The old gentleman?" Barbie was surprised. "That never happened before," she murmured, and, with shaking head, stood a moment pondering this strange thing.

At length, abandoning it as quite beyond her powers of analysis, she urged Bettina not unkindly: "You'd better drink your tea, Miss, while it's hot," and left the room.

Now, alone, Bettina looked after the quaint figure with a smile of high amusement, then took advantage of her solitude for the arrangement of her hair before a mirror, and, after a careful search of the room, its entrances and windows with her eyes, to make certain no one saw her, took from the little handbag at her belt a powder puff, with which she dabbed her face, and then a bit of chamois, with which she made the distribution perfect.

As she was thus engaged the footsteps of the absent Hoffman sounded near the door through which he had departed, and she hid the puff and chamois with a cat-like swiftness. When he entered she was stand-

ing, as if lost in study, before a large oil-portrait of him, painted in his younger days.

He saw what so absorbed her and was pleased. He had a pair of Anna's large and comfortable knit slippers in his hand, but before he called attention to them, he approached the girl and looked across her shoulder.

"That's how I looked once on a time."

She turned to him as if surprised to find him there. "Ah, you see I was quite right about the classic head!" She swung her eyes to a companion portrait. "And this is Mrs. Hoffman?"

"Yes."

"A good face," she said a little patronizingly. "Denotes an even disposition.

"I'm not at all that way," she then cried impulsively, as if by saying this she might be laying herself open to harsh criticism, but yielded to an irresistible, frank impulse, which forced full confession of her most heinous sin. Her words came rapidly, vivaciously. "I am different every day—every hour." She seemed child-like and sincere, not too apologetic, but not self-assertive. "I just can't help it. I was *born* that way."

"I like that," he said admiringly. "Anything but that everlasting sameness!"

She threw him a quick glance, but he plainly did not realize how brilliant was the light which he had cast upon the situation existent in that house. Had he informed her, in so many words, that he was feeling rather far from satisfied with the woman at whose portrait she had just been looking, he could not

have made his meaning clearer. Had he frankly declared himself open to the influence of any fascinations she might have to offer, he could not have made his meaning clearer.

He himself had not the least idea that he had revealed himself so generously; indeed, he was not aware of the real contents of those hidden mental recesses which he had just exhibited.

But she saw all these things and smiled in her extraordinary depths, her face remaining grave. From that very moment she was sure that any clever, reasonably interesting woman who wished to divert Frederick Hoffman from the loyalty which he had sworn to keep inviolate might do so.

She had no wish to. Of what use was he to her, save as the means to an end? Too simply managed by but fairly clever methods to be genuinely interesting, bound to another woman old enough to be her mother, as he was old enough to be her father, his weak armor did not tempt her javelin. Where was the *young* man? She must ingratiate herself with the old gentleman, so that her real task might be the easier, but it lay with the young man. She turned from her companion and looked up at the portrait of the youth who filled her mind, though she had never seen him.

Hoffman followed her cleverly expressioned eyes. His reasoning had not advanced as far as hers had. The thought that he had been dissected mercilessly did not once occur to him.

"That's my son Harry," he exclaimed with pride.

He might snarl at Harry when they were together; he might complain of him to Alston or to the mother of the boy, but really he felt a fine paternal pride in him.

She recognized this and pandered to it. "Isn't he *handsome!*" she exclaimed enthusiastically. Then: "And how much he looks like you!"

Flattered, he bowed, pretending to accept the tribute as a joke, really accepting it at a high value, and definitely impressed by her excellence of judgment. "That's very nice of you." He crossed the room and took a photograph from the piano-top.

"And that's your daughter?" she inquired, all interest.

"Yes; that's my daughter Beatrice."

"She doesn't look like Mrs. Hoffman, either." She gave him a quick glance. "She's beautiful."

"You think so?" The man was beaming with self-satisfaction. "She's just gone back to the convent. But take your shoes off and slip into these."

He held out Anna's slippers to call her attention to them, then dropped them to the floor by the piano stool. He was not squire of dames enough to hand them to her, even in the midst of the warm glow with which she had surrounded him.

She found a seat and, rather obviously careful to conceal her ankles, began to work at her wet shoes. The notion flashed into her mind to try her power with him. Her shoes were truly very wet, but she had mastered them alone when they had been far wetter. Now, though fumbling with them, she pre-

tended to be helpless, and cast an appealing glance or two in his direction. Unguessing, he had crossed the room and stood looking from the window at the still determined storm.

"I can't get them off," she murmured, not too loudly, almost as if she might be talking to herself.

He did not turn from contemplation of the whirling snow.

"I say I don't seem able to get them off," she ventured further, and a little louder.

"I heard you—I heard you," he commented with a brief return to his old gruffness; but he looked around, and, after he had watched her seemingly hopeless struggles for a moment, made his way to her. "May I help you?" he asked curtly.

"Oh, I don't want to bother you."

"It's no bother," he said gallantly, and, to his own amazement and her deep delight, dropped to one knee before her, took one of her feet in his two hands and started at the task.

"You've drawn the strings into a hard knot," he commented, fumbling clumsily. "But a little patience —ah, there's one! Now the other."

She held the other foot out to him, and, after a moment's worry, he released that too.

"Thank you so very much!" she cried.

He ignored her gratitude, but crossed the room and placed the wet shoes on one of the queer shelves ornamenting the outside of the old stove. "They'll dry there."

Bettina, watching him with satisfaction, slipped her

"YOU'VE DRAWN THE STRINGS INTO A HARD KNOT." *p.* 150

dainty feet into the large, knitted slippers. They were very large, indeed, and instinctively, she shuffled in them, making them appear even looser than they really were. Her rich laugh gurgled out, and he turned to look at her, his own face smiling. That laugh was definitely contagious.

"Just see how they fit me!" she exclaimed, and held out a foot.

He was not blind to the trim ankle which her slightly raised skirt showed. The slipper surely seemed tremendous, caught, as she held it, on the toe of her small foot.

"They'll not pinch you," he said genially, in a way that subtly praised her tiny feet, and subtly criticized the feet for which the slippers had been knitted.

"Hardly! Regular life-boats, aren't they?" She looked at him archly, but trembled in her soul, wondering if she might have gone too far in the implied criticism of his wife.

It was a relief and something of a revelation to her—a revelation which she did not fail to file away in her wise, malicious, selfish little head—when she made sure that she had roused no emotions of resentment in him.

But she sobered as the smile died from his face. He *had* caught it after all and was annoyed by it. Instantly she made a little reparation with: "But they're so nice and warm!"

The diversion was successful. It distracted his attention. "I hope you haven't taken cold."

"Oh, no; I'm feeling very comfortable . . . now. You have been so kind! And the cook brought me some tea while you were out. May I drink it?"

"Of course you may." His tone was quite astonishingly fatherly.

"And will you keep me company?" She sat down at the table.

"I will with pleasure," he assented, although he had not taken tea at that time of the day in all his long career. "Would it annoy you if I took a few whiffs at my pipe?" He was getting on so comfortably with this charming creature that he asked this question in experiment.

She did not answer him in words, but instantly sprang from the table with a quick glance about the room, spied the little smoker's table, hurried to it, found his pipe, took the cover from the tobacco-jar and began to fill the bowl.

"Let me fix it for you. Dear papa taught me just how to do it. You don't mind?" ("Dear papa" had really never smoked a pipe.)

"Why, no." Really he was very pleased and watched her deft fingers at their work with a broad smile. "You seem to be expert."

"I have always done it for papa." There was a charming hint of daughterly devotion in the way she said this.

"I dare say he enjoyed his smoke just twice as much."

She approached him prettily with the filled pipe, and in one hand a match ready for the lighting. "Do you really think so?"

What appealing, innocent eyes the girl had, to be sure!

"Indeed I do."

"Then try this and see if I have spoiled the flavor."

He took the pipe and she held the lighted match above it while he puffed. "I think *I* like it better, too," he said.

"How very nice! It is as if we two were smoking the pipe of peace together."

He grunted a comfortable assent between puffs and she sat again, sipping her tea slowly. He smiled. "Let me ask you a question, Miss—Miss——"

"Curtis."

"Thank you. Is your father living?"

Here was her chance to be effective. "Ah, no; papa is dead." Her voice was low and sad. After having claimed performance of such various services to him she scarcely could acknowledge that his death had happened when she was a two-year infant. She determined that she would not mention her step-father.

"Then it was that we discovered that he had lost everything," she went on pathetically. "Something had to be done. My brother Arthur is at school." She did not explain that the school which he had chosen was the racing stable and the betting-ring on southern tracks. "My sister is too young to help, and so I've—had to——"

That she had had to make the bitter sacrifice of consenting to assist his wife was cleverly implied, but was not stated.

"It is brave of you—very brave. I'm sure you will

make your way in the world. You're bright, have nice manners and a pretty face, and if you but have courage——"

"Yes," she admitted, her voice full of pathos. "That is what I need—courage. With the new year I intend to begin a new life—I shall try really to be brave; I shall try to never murmur at a sacrifice; I shall—oh, Mr. Hoffman, won't you drink with me to the new life in the new year?" She raised her tea cup and stood.

"Certainly I will." He also rose and held his glass of claret up. They clinked the glass against the tea cup.

"To the new life!" she exclaimed earnestly.

"To the new year!" said he.

She laughed again—that maddening, fascinating laugh.

"Eh?" said he inquiringly, much entertained.

"How funny—tea and wine!"

As they were laughing at the humor of this unusual combination, Harry entered, saw them as they were engrossed in their own matters, withdrew, amazed and puzzled, and then reapproached and knocked.

He had never seen his father in such spirits. Who was the young woman? She could not be the person whom his mother was expecting. Surely his staid father——

"Come in," called Hoffman.

The boy entered almost shyly. "Father—oh, I beg your pardon! I didn't know you had a visitor."

Hoffman presented him. "My son—the—er—

young gentleman." He smiled. "Harry, this is Miss Bettina—er—er——"

"Curtis," she relieved him.

"Whom your mother has engaged as an assistant to the lady of the house."

Harry's lips were smiling and his eyes examined her with pleasure. He acknowledged the introduction and stood smiling at the newcomer.

"But you must not neglect the master of the house," said Hoffman playfully to her. "Little delicate attentions like filling his pipe——"

Bettina caught his eye and laughed and he laughed with her.

"Father, you're in a splendid humor," said Harry in surprise.

Hoffman looked at him rather sharply. "Yes—er—Valentine brought up some very—er—er cheerful statements."

Then, seeing how earnest Harry's regard of the newcomer was, and wondering, possibly, if his youth might so attract her that his elders would be likely to have small attention: "By the way, son, your mother tells me that you want to run down to New York for a few weeks."

He did not know just why he said this—whether it was because he wished to make Bettina think him generous and kind, or whether he was finding her so fine a playfellow that he did not wish to share her, for the present, even with his son.

Harry stood nonplussed.

"I've decided that you ought to have the chance,"

said Hoffman. "Go ahead. Enjoy yourself." He spoke with hearty generosity.

But Harry had no mind to leave at just the moment when this radiant being had appeared upon the horizon. He drew nearer to the table. "Oh, never mind, father. I'd just as soon stay here," he countered with a hint of magnanimity on his own part, "and—er—buckle down to business. Life—er—in the country is not so bad, even in the winter."

"I don't want to have you think me a tyrant," Hoffman urged. "Take a little vacation. We can afford it." Surely he did not wish to have this charming girl think him a stingy person.

Harry was put to it for a weapon against this.

"I really have gotten so I don't care much for the noise and rush of city life," he said, abjuring gaiety as might a monk.

His father gave him a long look of vast surprise, not wholly without irony.

"I find it so—er—restful here," said Harry.

"Well, just as you like, my boy." Hoffman's tone was really reluctant; then, still more hesitantly: "Won't you sit down with us?"

To his distress Bettina made a place for the pleased youth beside her, and the boy leaned toward her eagerly, with interested, even fascinated eyes. Hoffman saw with indignation and surprise that the youngster had a very pretty way with him.

"You're from New York, Miss Curtis?"

"Yes."

"Won't you feel lonesome here?"

HOFFMAN SAW WITH INDIGNATION AND SURPRISE. p. 156

She gave a quick glance at his father first, and then at him, followed by a gesture of content. "I—think not. I'm beginning to look forward with real pleasure to my new duties."

"There's always a lot to do here," said Hoffman—the same man who had pooh-poohed his wife's complaint that she found her strength overtaxed. "I hope it won't prove too much for you."

"Oh, no; I can do a whole lot—if I want to."

"You'll have to. But I think life in the country will do you good."

"In the spring," said Harry with enthusiasm, "in the spring and summer you will love it here."

"Indeed you will," endorsed his father.

"Everything in full bloom," the son went on ecstatically. "And——"

The dazzled males were leaning forward on the table, vying with each other in their efforts to assure Bettina that the Belleville life would not be dull when Barbara came in. Catching sight of this extraordinary spectacle, she paused in the doorway, thoroughly astonished. Recovering control she ventured, "Miss, your room is ready for you," and then stood, again absorbed in wonder, gazing.

Hoffman glanced up crossly. "What's the matter now?" he asked.

Barbie drew back and threw up her hands, frightened as she always was, by that particular phase of his demeanor, offended, upon the defensive. "Goodness gracious! I only wanted to tell the young lady that her room is warm now——"

"Thank you," said Bettina very sweetly, and pointed to her hat and coat as might one born to command. "Take my hat and coat upstairs, please."

This shocked Barbara. Was this young woman to be chummy with the master and the scion of the house, to give her casual orders as easily as Mrs. Hoffman could, to step into a position of command, when, as a matter of fact, she was a servant as she was herself? In a pettish rage she went to the big chair into which Hoffman had tossed the garments when he had relieved their owner of them and yanked the coat from it with such brisk violence of wrath that the hat and gloves fell to the floor.

Hoffman, watching her, was infuriated. He struck the table with his fist. "Can't you be careful?" he demanded.

Her offense increased. "My, my! Can't a body drop something once in a while without——" Her grumbling trailed off down the hall.

Bettina watched this episode with interest, but made no comment on it. When it ended she took up the conversation where it had been dropped. She was thoroughly enjoying Belleville as she found it.

"When I arrived here my heart was very heavy, but not now—no!—I feel I am with really good people."

"You are very welcome," Hoffman cordially assured her.

"Most welcome," Harry echoed, and had a disapproving look from Hoffman as reward.

Bettina turned her eyes toward Hoffman and then again toward Harry very sparklingly, most gratefully,

delightfully. "You shall not regret having taken me in," she fervently assured them both, "for I am young and strong and have a happy disposition." Filled with the joy of this adventure and now wholly unafraid, she raised her sweet, young voice and thrilled:

" 'My heart is young, my spirits gay.' "

Filled with a fresh delight at this new detail of the girl's accomplishments, Hoffman gazed at her with pleased surprise. "What a pretty voice you have!"

Bettina looked down as if affrighted by the impulse which had led her into taking such a liberty.

"You must sing for us often, won't you?"

"If I'm permitted," she said modestly.

"Why not?" said Hoffman, and waved his hand toward the piano. "There's the piano. No one will touch it if you don't, till Beatrice comes home again."

With a renewal of that instinctive tendency to fling at the absent mistress of the mansion, Bettina said, as if surprised: "Mrs. Hoffman is not musical?" In her voice was veiled astonishment at women who were not musical.

"Mother?" Harry laughed at the suggestion. "No; she's *not.*" His lip did not curl; he loved his mother; but he did not wish to fail in his appreciation of this girl with music in her soul, simply because he fancied that it was not in his mother's soul.

"I should think not!" Hoffman emphasized and in his tone was no such reservation.

"Oh, I just love music!" Bettina's voice was full of young extravagance. "I think a home without it is

certain to be cold and dismal. I brought such pretty songs with me—and some duets, a number of them composed by Mr. Theodore Sevigny, a dear friend of ours." A thrill of loyalty to Theodore was apparent for an instant in her heart. "He is such a wonderful musician!"

"You must let us hear them all," said Hoffman, angry for a moment, that his musical accomplishments had been neglected since the glee-club days of college. For some reason his wrath indefinitely burned against his wife for this, too. Why had she not been, in her young days, as this girl was—full of life, and song, and——

The maiden full of life and song interrupted his reflections. "Indeed I will," said she, "and in the long winter evenings, when we all sit around the table, we'll sing together! Shall we?" The prospect so delighted her that that fruity laugh trilled out to charm again the father and the son.

And now an inspiration smote her. "Oh," said she, springing from her seat, "I know such a delightful humming-chorus!" She took a step toward the piano. "I'll sing the little song and you have nothing to do except to hum. Shall I? I suppose you can hum, can't you?"

"Well," said Harry brazenly, "father certainly can *make* things hum, at any rate, if he puts his mind on it."

Bettina ran to the piano and they followed, eagerly, falling to the places which her waving hand allotted to them.

"Now, then, attention!" she exclaimed as she softly touched the keys.

Lightly, gracefully, her fingers ran along the ivories, outlining the air, and as they cleverly performed her pleasant voice intoned:

"'There once was a grouchy bumble-bee—
"'Hum-um-um-m.'"

They listened with delight.

"Now you, Mr. Hoffman."

But for the moment this was quite too much for Mr. Hoffman. Harry, however, who had fully entered into the youthful spirit of the thing went to him and urged him. Finally the old man gathered up his courage, emitting:

"'Hum-um-um.'"

As he did so, Harry and Bettina joined him, making of the vocalization a fine chord.

In delight she sang the next line:

"'A cunning old bee, indeed, was he.'"

The chorus came now without hesitation:

"'Hum-um-um.'"
"'The bee was looking for a treat,
"'And stolen honey tastes so sweet!'"
"'Hum-um-um.'"

The chorus joined in promptly and successfully, and Harry and his father both threw back their heads and laughed with glee as it was finished—threw back their heads and laughed exactly at the moment when Anna Hoffman came into the room.

"Oh, mother!" Harry chortled joyfully.

Her husband was embarrassed. He felt that he had been made a fool of, and, curiously, it did not occur to him that it had been Bettina who had done this vicious act; it seemed to him that Anna had accomplished it by coming in where she was not expected—and not wanted.

"Miss Curtis has—arrived," he said inanely.

"So Barbie told me," Anna remarked calmly. Then to Bettina with impersonal courtesy: "I am glad you have come, Miss Curtis."

Bettina really was much embarrassed, and not a little frightened. She was conscious of the fact that she had led these innocents astray; she was more aware than Anna was that she was an intruder, poaching on preserves in which she had no right. She jumped up, nervously, advanced and courtesied politely—courtesied, to her disgust, in such a way that Anna's house shoes obtrusively appeared beneath her walking skirt.

"Thank you," she said carefully.

"I see you've made yourself at home," said Anna, and Bettina wondered if the words presaged an outbreak; but they did not, for they were followed by a reassuring: "That was right."

Even Bettina Curtis was abashed by what she felt to be the other woman's generosity. It was not gen-

erosity. It was only dignified acceptance of a situation which Anna, to her great dismay, felt, in her heart, had risen out of thin air to confront her with a troublous problem.

"I hope you'll excuse me," said Bettina, "I——"

Anna interrupted her, calm, unaffected, unimpressed. "Your room is ready for you. Take a little rest. Then, at dinner, we can talk everything over."

"As you wish, madam," Bettina said submissively, and started toward the hallway, shuffling, as she walked, in the loose bedroom slippers.

At that moment Anna caught sight of the shoes, drying on the shelf of the old stove. "Miss Curtis," she suggested, "don't forget your shoes."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Bettina humbly, starting for them.

But the exuberant Harry would have none of this. While both Hoffman and Bettina, possibly because of somewhat guilty consciences, had been crushed into a solemn, deferential silence, by the entrance of the mistress of the mansion, he, innocent in youth, which sees no harm, but only natural instinct, in enjoying pretty girls, strode gaily toward the shoes.

"Don't trouble yourself," he gaily urged. "I'll carry them for you, if you don't mind."

Bettina vanished through the door which led into the hall, a picture of subdued, respectful girlishness. Harry followed with the two shoes swinging violently at the ends of stiff, triumphant arms, which swept wide circles. He cast a glance of merriment at his mother as he vanished.

She looked after him and shook her head, a very noticeable little frown between her eyebrows.

"We shall have to keep our eyes on Harry," she said gravely, and then, with no further comment on the recent startling happenings: "I hear Mr. Alston called."

"Yes," said Hoffman, "to wish us a happy new year." Now he recovered slightly. Certainly there was in prospect more amusement than he had expected. "Let us hope that it *will* be a happy new year."

"God grant it!" Anna answered fervently, but with a grave and unexpectant face.

CHAPTER VII

January wore away, and February. March came and went, in an unusually mild week, taking with it the snow which had lain almost continually deep since the great storm which had delayed Alston's journey homeward from New York—that journey which had had momentous consequences in the coming of Bettina Curtis to the Hoffman homestead.

In the red-brick house life became more complicated. Youth drew to youth, inevitably, and Harry and Bettina smiled much, if secretly, into each other's eyes.

In this surreptitious courtship Bettina felt small sense that she was really disloyal to her Theodore, to whom she sent long letters by almost every mail, and from whom she had elaborate replies, impassioned, yearning, even through their egotism, inclosed in envelopes which she addressed and sent to him, so that his epistles would come directed in a woman's hand. She told the Hoffmans they were from her mother, and their frequency and bulk gave Mrs. Curtis a reputation in the household for devotion to her daughter which would have much surprised her.

The singing lessons prospered, all but Anna joining in them, save, of course, poor Barbara, whose nose, these days, was wholly out of joint. She was frankly

jealous of the girl. One day when she was bitterly discussing her with Anna, who, for two or three weeks had been ill, and now was just recovering, she designated her, in a linguistic triumph, a "young enterloper."

Anna smiled. She did not like the girl, but she was of some help to her, and this year she had sadly needed help.

"You mean interloper, Barbara," she corrected.

"Maybe I do," said Barbara, "but, anyway, I mean her—that—g i r l !" She spread this word out in a way that meant supreme contempt. "What does your 'interloper' mean, now, Mrs. Hoffman?"

"One who intrudes."

"What Mr. Harry calls a 'butter-in'?"

Anna laughed—not very heartily. "About that."

"Then that ain't what I mean, at all. 'Enter-loper' is my word. I mean a woman that first enters a good, God-fearing home like ours, with a nice young man in it, and then elopes with the young man. Enter-loper —clear as day! Maybe there had ought to be another 'e' in it. Enter-*e*-loper—that might tell it better. But 'inter' means insides—the doctor told me so one time when he said it was a better word than that to use. He seemed to be quite jolly. Was he laughing at me, Mrs. Hoffman?"

"Maybe, Barbara; the doctor's always very jolly." But she had no heart to be amused in these days, even by Barbie's most extraordinary vagaries, and turned wearily to gaze out of the window. "I'm not feeling very well to-day."

"Ain't you, Mrs. Hoffman? I was particularly hoping you were better."

"Why particularly?"

"Nothing, long's you ain't. Some day when you are—then I'm going to have some things to say."

"Say them now, Barbie."

"No; they'd make you worse."

Anna laughed. "You old croaker! If I didn't know that what you'll have to say amounts to nothing, what you've already said would worry me to death."

"I don't see why. I haven't even mentioned Mr. Harry's name, and I ain't going to." Barbie set her lips in a firm line, as if determined at all hazards to stand by this decision.

Again Anna laughed. "How mysterious you are! Then it's something about Harry?"

"I didn't say it was now, Mrs. Hoffman. I said I wouldn't mention him. Don't you get to worrying about Mr. Harry. Not that if you were real well there mightn't be some things to worry over; but as long's you're sick you mustn't."

"You absurd old thing! If I didn't know how silly you can be I should be frightened."

"Listen, Mrs. Hoffman," Barbie urged mysteriously, really fearful that she might disturb her. "Don't you pay any attention to a word I say."

Anna sank back somewhat wearily, and, when Bettina came to read to her, listened with far less attention than she looked—and what she looked at was the

young girl's beautiful but somewhat selfish and too wilful face.

Once or twice each morning lately had come toward her from the slightly oblique corners of Bettina's eyes a quick glance which had filled her with the thought that, had she dared, the girl would have subjected her to scrutiny as searching, but she was not sure of this. Those slanting glances might well be the mere trick of a reader, curious to know if what she read aloud was interesting her listener.

That Barbie's thought that her companion might be smitten with a fancy for the son of Frederick Hoffman, rich, very handsome, brilliant, well-bred and well-educated, might be accurate enough, seemed to her most reasonable. She could not blame the girl for that—any one might fall in love with Harry; but that Harry could have fallen victim to the charms of one so obviously his inferior, in moral tone and depth of culture, as well as education, despite her smattering of accomplishments, was to her incredible.

She would not believe it. Harry was too fine-grained, she argued, to be swayed by one possessing merely, or even mainly, physical charms, and this was true, she thought, of the young woman Mr. Alston had found in New York for her.

She never for an instant harbored the idea that Bettina was not good. She might think her undesirable without believing that; and she believed the girl to be in love with Harry—for which she, of all women, found it most difficult to blame her. Even should she not be definitely in love with him, it would

be hard to blame her for feeling an ambition to secure him as a mate, for he was rich and she was poor, and life in Belleville (Anna fondly thought) would surely seem like harbor in a peaceful haven to any person who, in the heartless rush of New York City, had endured the loss and ensuing misery of which Bettina had, not very accurately, told.

All this reasoning being hers, it was naturally true that Anna found Barbie's worries not so very startling. While she did not give Bettina credit for the highest motives, she did consider her a person who was merely trying, not without excuse, to take the best Fate offered, after a long period of deprivation, possibly real misery, due to poverty and family inefficiency; but she had faith in her young son.

No; in Harry, Anna found the least cause of her worries. The greatest cause her husband furnished. The old Fred who had traveled with her through so many years of married life, not always peaceful, but never very turbulent, seemed, in these days, to have vanished. His strange irritability had not decreased, but increased, and very often made her miserable; she did not dream that really he had stopped loving her, for that she would have thought impossible, but he showed fewer evidences of affection than he ever had before; Barbie, whom she loved as one can only love a servant faithful through long years, was being driven by his tantrums into nervousness which largely nullified her competence. At particularly trying times, when Fred's temper flew at her with an unusual virulence and lack of reason, she was even glad that Bea-

trice was not at home. More than once, indeed, she had been definitely thankful—so thankful that at night she mentioned it as cause of gratitude when she offered her petitions to the Almighty. How horribly would she have been humiliated had the modest, white-souled girl been present at the bitter "scenes" which constantly became more frequent! She knew that nervous strain, born of this new development in her domestic life, rather than bronchial tubes unusually susceptible to cold, had been principally responsible for the curious breakdown in her health which the late winter had brought on.

She sometimes wondered if she took exactly the right course with Fred. There were many times when she imagined that had she changed to meet his changes she might still have held him close to her; but there lay the trouble—she had found a change impossible. Her nature was quite fixed; even her manner was unalterably settled for the years to come by life-long habit; his had been metamorphosed in twelve months.

"Repression" had been the actual, if not the nominal, watchword of her early training. She had come of outwardly calm stock, unemotional upon the surface, but, like the traditional "still waters," running very deep. Fred, upon the other hand, had ever been somewhat extravagant in his emotional life—exaggerated, possibly. He had shown it in his wooing, sometimes shocking her with his extraordinary violence of passion; he had shown it in their early married life, developing a jealousy which, always without

reason, had sometimes made them both unhappy. For years she never had quite dared to even show cordiality of friendship for another man, fearing that by doing so she would make Fred his enemy. On one occasion he had even flared at Alston, his best friend, because she had permitted him to be her escort on a rainy night, although she felt quite sure that he had never guessed that Alston had once been a suitor for her hand. The episode had almost wrecked the two men's friendship which had begun at college.

And yet, in spite of all his selfishness of possession, Hoffman had gradually ceased to be the lover. Within ten years after they had married, no, within five years, he had assumed a manner in his home akin to that which he assumed when he went to his office—dictatorial at all times, crabbed when he was even slightly crossed, intolerant of all excuses. Now this had grown on him, until he sometimes made her life a burden.

She wondered if she might not have been wrong, when, in their early married life, she had too rigidly shut out all interests beyond the practical necessities of their advancement in the little town of Belleville. He had been a careful business man, shrewd as he was honest, enterprising as he was conservative, mindful of small details; but he had sometimes wished to vary the monotony of their existence—it had been monotonous; she admitted that, and liked it—with adventures, such as journeys to New York, or even a trip abroad to the far land of his forbears. These things she had discouraged always, never feeling that their

place was quite secure enough to warrant ventures from it into the unknown.

She knew now that they might have acted safely on his impulses. Events had justified his conviction of solidity; their lives might well have been a little more eventful, and the lack of variation might have had its large effect in making him irascible, intolerant; but she had acted for what she thought the best, and, even now, could not find much to criticize in the course which she had taken. Besides, this great change in him had not been gradual; it had not spread through the years; it had come that winter. When folk married, she believed, the traditions of her youth had taught her, they must "settle down." If they married early, as had she and Fred, then they must early "settle down." Therefore she thought she had been right. She did not blame herself. Events bewildered rather than reproached her.

And Fred now was following with Harry exactly the same course which his own father had followed with him in his own youth, insisting on exactly the same line of conduct which she had urged on him in their young married life. So Fred was inconsistent. With almost bitter opposition he had combated her desire to leave Harry in the Law School, after the need had seemed to come for his presence in the factory, at home; up to that strange winter day when he had urged the boy to follow what had been his impulse to go to New York for a week or two, he had been stern as his own father had been in his insistence that the lad do business, think business, eat business, and

sleep business without pause, exactly as his father had insisted he should do. He had found cause for criticism when in him had developed impulses precisely like those which, when they had been combated in himself, had given birth to most resentment. And now he was driving Harry as he himself in his own youth had been driven. He gave him the constant criticism as his own father had given him.

There at home, in the long evenings of the winter, he had often yielded strangely to the spirit of light merriment which had come into the household with the entrance of the girl, Bettina; to the amazement of his wife and plainly to his son's surprise, he had often joined the young folk in their silly songs at the piano, sometimes driving her to refuge in her room in search of peace and quiet. And this had also marked a startling change in him.

She found there things intensely puzzling, almost as distressing as the vicious temper he had begun constantly to show toward her.

It was to Barbie's nervousness, born of Hoffman's constant criticism of her, that Anna charged what she considered the hallucinations of the aged servant concerning danger that her Harry—fine, manly, clean-minded and high-class—high-class! that was it—it was that which certainly would save him!—might fall in love with the girl from New York City. She could, she felt convinced, regard her worries as of no significance. They were simply due to unfounded apprehension of a general disaster, born of Hoffman's altered attitude toward her.

Having come to this comfortable conclusion and, despite her instinct to get up, disregarding the deep languor of her convalescence, go downstairs to the kitchen and undertake the detailed supervision of the household, Anna sank back into her cushioned chair and tried so hard to put her worries from her that the effort brought her sleep.

She would have slept less peacefully had she been witness of the scene which, at about that time, began enactment on the floor below. Nine o'clock had come, but Harry suddenly dashed into the dim library, where Barbie was at work with broom and dust-cloth, garnering the corners, polishing the bric-à-brac—two duties which she could not trust to Ann Eliza, who, since the Christmas holidays, had been almost constantly a helper at the house.

Blinded by the dim light he did not see her instantly, and softly called—called in that half-secret tone which she had learned to hear with dread, for it almost always means some question about Bettina, which he felt safe to trust to her, but which he seemed to have a feeling would distress his parents should they know of it.

"Well," she said, from her near post in the shadow, so suddenly that he was almost startled.

"Isn't Miss Bettina up yet?"

"She?" said Barbara, ill naturedly. "Not much."

The boy turned away disappointed, and as Barbara appeared in the full glare of the sunlight which a suddenly raised shade admitted to the room, she thought she caught a glimpse of something in his hand which

he had made a hasty movement to conceal behind him. And she knew what that something was—it was nothing less than violets!

She hurried toward him, pleased. Of course, he had discovered them, and brought them, first of the season's flowers, to cheer his mother. Yet that was rather curious, too—Anna did not like flowers to be picked. She had her own ideas of what ought, and what ought not to be done with God's floral gifts. She looked on it as waste to take them from their growing roots, where they would thrive for many days, and bind them into bundles, where they would last for only hours. Barbie, herself, in whose old soul lingered remnants of the sentiment of bygone youth, believed in picking flowers. Besides, she thoroughly approved of Mr. Harry, and everything he did.

"What beautiful violets!" she cried, her eyes glistening as she saw their richness fully.

Visibly embarrassed, he whirled toward her, concealing them again; but in an instant, seeing the futility of this, now that once he had revealed them, he brought them forth somewhat shamefacedly, and held them out for her to look at.

"There's a patch all blue with them, at the edge of the road down by the bridge, just before you reach the factory. At the little grove, you know."

She nodded. "They're always early there. For your mother?"

He had the grace to blush a little. "Why—er—no. She doesn't care for flowers. How—er—is she this morning, Barbie?" He was sorry he had not asked

this question when he had first come in. At breakfast time his mother had been sleeping and Barbie had not known how she was feeling.

"Better. Spring's good for her. But your father worries her."

"He worries everybody! He'll give me a ragging for not being at the factory."

"Well, why aren't you there, then?"

"I came—back with these."

"I'll put them in water." She held her hand out for them.

He drew them back and again held them behind him. "No; not now, Barbie."

She looked at him reproachfully. "You're going to let them die for want of water?"

He made no answer and that made her cross.

"Your mother doesn't like to have flowers picked, anyway. You know that well enough."

"Doesn't like to have them picked?" His voice was full of protest. There was much of the child in him. "That's what they're for."

Now Barbie saw the truth of this queer little situation—Harry's absence from the factory, when he should have been there, his violation of what he well knew was his mother's prejudice against picking flowers, his rush back to the house and his inquiry for Bettina. He had picked the flowers for her, of course, and brought them back for her! It made her angry.

"Of course they'll go to the young lady!" she said huffily. "Everything for her!"

"Now, Barbara!" he pleaded, plainly wishing her to

cease her comment, and, she knew, implying a petition that she speak to no one else of the small secret which she had discovered.

And, although she had, within ten minutes, been complaining to his mother about his attentions to the girl, she tacitly agreed to keep this secret. She never could resist him—her beloved Mr. Harry—when it came to definite things, even though she might make general complaints about him and issue gloomy prophecies of what would happen if things between him and Bettina went on as they were going.

"W e l l!" she grunted with reluctance, drawling the word out.

But she was not disposed to drop the subject of Bettina. She disliked her with as definite an emphasis as she was capable of giving to dislike. She was not jealous of her youth and beauty; she was definitely jealous of the fact that she was given attention which had never fallen to her own lot from the members of the family. Anna (she believed) very definitely liked to have her read to her, Hoffman had developed an extraordinary tolerance of her, such as he rarely showed to any one—he even *sang* with her—even when Harry was not by! He had not sung before since he had first come home from college!

Her suspicions of her were acute. She could not name a single sin which she was certain she had done, but she was a sight too pretty, she was a sight too elegant for one in service, she was a sight too friendly with all of them but Anna. She felt it a good thing for every one concerned that Beatrice was not at home

to see her "goings on," although she scarcely could have said of what these most objectionable "goings on" consisted. Indefinitely she looked upon Bettina as a sort of heathen from the outer darkness, a barbarian come there to invade. But her simple soul was curious about her.

"I want to ask you something, Mr. Harry."

"What is it?"

" 'Bettina'—is that a regular Christian name?"

He looked at her, half in surprise, half in a large tolerance of her ignorance, half in annoyance that she possibly could doubt that the young woman, whom he had begun to think the world's most radiant creature, could bear any but a "regular Christian" name.

"Of course," he answered. " 'Bettina' is only another form of 'Barbara.' "

She was incredulous. "For *'Barbara!'* Is her name the same as mine?"

He nodded emphatically, convincingly.

"Then why does she call herself 'Bettina' and not 'Barbara'?"

He was nonplussed. He did not know how best he might explain this matter. He was not certain of his facts.

"Well, you know," he said at length, after an instant's pause for thought, "not every Barbara is a Bettina." He went to Barbie earnestly. "There's a fine distinction. Now *you—you* are a Barbara, while *she—she* is a Bettina." It was clear enough to him. "You understand, don't you?"

She did not, in the least, which was excusable. But she was not offended.

"Not a word," she answered. "I can't see why she should be called 'Bettina' when her name is 'Barbara.'" She gave the problem up and took the easiest way out of the involved train of thought, shaking her head in its dismissal. "Oh, it's just nonsense. She always wants to have something extra." Then she added with decision: "From now on I'm going to call her just 'Miss Barbara!'" She was instantly determined upon this; she would not have her putting on her airs about her name. If "Barbara" was good enough for her, then it must be for this young person from New York. Having reached this definite conclusion she left Harry and went on about her work.

He stood at the window waiting, somewhat nervously, occasionally glancing behind him at the great Dutch clock which, with its wooden works, ticked away the seconds there in the library, as it had done since his first memory began, and since the beginning of his father's memory. He knew that he should be down at the factory. He knew that if his father found him elsewhere, there would be criticism, not utterly unjust; but he had run across these violets, first of a backward season, doubly precious because of the hard winter which had gone before them, and he wished Bettina to get them at once.

Bettina! How utterly the girl had captured his young imagination! What delightful, unexpected things she did and said! What tales she told him of New York! How well she played! How charming

were her songs!—so up to date!—the very latest from the season's operas along Broadway! How much superior was she to the giggling, unaccomplished, too shy girls of Belleville!

At this stage of his infatuation even Dorothy Mason, daughter of the best family in town, and niece of Senator Stevenson, to whom he had been very much devoted during his last vacation, sank into the class of commonplace. Of course, she was a lovely girl, well bred, and all that sort of thing, and had been educated at the best of schools—but she did not know life.

She was not worldly wise, as was Bettina; she had never had experience with jolly suppers, at which all the guests were the celebrities of art, or music, or the drama, like those of which Bettina sometimes told him, under pledge of secrecy—suppers at the restaurants of Broadway, where wit and wine flowed freely, where (as she had hinted delicately) some of the stiffest of society's stupid conventionalities were quite set aside. Dorothy and Bettina? There could not be the slightest comparison between them, he reflected.

He had thought the matter over carefully. He must marry this exquisite creature or forever be disconsolate. He presumed his father would be furious, he feared his mother's heart would be distressed almost to breaking, he could imagine Beatrice and her horrified amazement that he should choose any one except her dear friend Dorothy. He even had a twinge of conscience as he thought of Dorothy herself, for they had been the best of friends. At one time he had

thought himself in love with her. But he did not think she cared for him. She was so stiff! Like all the Belleville girls!

He had few illusions about the attitude his father would be certain to assume toward this enterprise which had become the dearest of his plans. He would be furious. The governor was so ill-natured, even with things at their best, that when he made announcement that he meant not to stay in Belleville and take his place at the old factory, but planned to marry this bright creature and fly with her to New York City, there to live a brilliant life, full of an endeavor of some sort which should not be at all dull, the governor would certainly fly into a great passion. But—what of it? He was determined to be brave, to make the plunge—if Bettina would plunge with him. If she would not, then life would be all black, and blank, and bleak—quite hopeless!

So utterly was he engrossed in these reflections that he did not hear his father enter. The first warning that he had arrived came when his harsh voice rang out, in answer to some query made by the soft-toned Valentine.

"I've got the papers here in the house safe," Harry heard him say. "I'll give them to you to take to the office. What time was that appointment?"

"Ten-thirty, Mr. Hoffman."

Harry felt like shrinking through the window out into that sunshine, which, throughout his reverie of Bettina, he had been subconsciously enjoying, but, unfortunately, the day was raw, despite the sunshine,

and Barbie had not raised the window. He could not shrink through it without first making a great racket raising it. He did not dare to look around. Perhaps his venture back to bring the violets had been a little foolish.

"I'll be there," he heard his father say, and he knew that he was going toward the safe and opening it.

He could hear the clicking of the combination and the rustling of some papers as he took them out, the slight jar of the heavy iron door as it was pushed back into place, and more clicking as his father closed the combination. Of course, when he looked up, he would surely see him!

And he did.

"Harry!" he exclaimed as this occurred. "Why aren't you at the office?"

"Little late this morning, father," said the embarrassed boy, trying hard to head things off. "Some things here at the house to look after." Now he held the violets behind him very carefully, taking more precautions than he had with Barbie—taking desperate precautions.

Valentine, the superintendent, was really fond of Harry, and, before he quite went through the door, saw that his young friend was in for it. He threw him a significant glance of warning, and stood hesitant.

Hoffman—spruce in a new spring suit; he had been rather lavish with his tailor lately, far more so than he usually was—stood scowling at the boy.

"No wonder your work at the office is behind hand

when you hang around the house, here, half the day!"

Harry squirmed uneasily, and, through an extraordinary effort, struck an attitude which made it seem quite natural that his hand should be behind him. He would not have had his father see those violets for——

"It won't do, young man," his father thundered. "I won't tolerate it."

"I do the best I know how," Harry answered childishly, and knowing that he sounded childish, which added to his woes. Why had he not thought out a definite errand when he had taken chances this way? He knew. The run back with the violets had been as unconsidered as the return flight of a mating bird. "I'm doing quite my best."

His father looked at him unpleasantly. "If that's the case," he said, with slow and scathing sarcasm, "you'd better find out how to do a little better. I didn't know that you were stupid."

Harry writhed.

"When *I* was of your age my father worked me like a slave."

"I know, father," the boy urged, "but times have changed. Er—things are run on—on more advanced principles, in these days."

"Principles will never advance far enough to do away with work," said Hoffman sternly.

"Well, things are different, anyhow." The boy was desperate. "With machinery—and education—and all that—why, folks don't have to grind—grind night and day—the way you did."

Hoffman looked at him severely, then his face, now hard as nails, took on an ironic twist. "Oh, I didn't know that," he replied, almost malevolently. "Thanks, my boy, for those nuggets of wisdom."

Then he suddenly remembered that Valentine was standing in the doorway and whirled rapidly on him. He felt that Valentine, in some way, was in league with his unindustrious son.

"I suppose, Valentine," he said, "that what my son has said quite meets with your approval?"

Valentine, who was a person of small force, competent enough, but certainly not inclined to be aggressive with the man who hired and paid him, no matter how keenly he might sympathize with Harry, was at a loss. He knew that he must not too strongly endorse what Harry had declared, but his sense of loyalty to his young friend was too great to permit him to go back on him entirely. He knew—none better!—that Hoffman, in these days, was prone to be unreasonable.

"Well," he stammered, "to some extent—I—— Conditions have, you must admit, Mr. Hoffman——"

Hoffman was entirely disgusted. "That's right!" he cried irascibly. "Know as much as you can—know more than your elders, both of you—young gentlemen!" He put strong emphasis upon the last two words.

Now Harry was aroused. He felt that he was being outraged. It was true that he had not gone to the works as early as he might have, but it was also true—or he honestly believed it to be true—that there

had been no real necessity for him to hurry to his desk.

"Father! That's not fair!" he cried. "The world has *need* of young men!" He was sure that this was very neat, entirely convincing.

But his father only looked at him with arrogant, insulting eyes. "Oh," he slowly drawled. "That's another thing I didn't know. Certainly. Young men *are* useful. It would be impossible to engineer a picnic or a dance without them. They are therefore also ornamental." His tone was viciously ironic. "But they are no novelty, my son. They have been here before. We need not coddle them for fear there may not, sometime, be others."

This roused Valentine. As a matter of fact he worked with an unusual industry, taking little time for pleasure. When Harry had gone off to study, he had deeply envied him; when he had been brought home to learn the business before he had finished law-school, he had felt sorry for him, had felt that the "old gentleman" was not quite fair with his young son, and surely Hoffman must not bring unjust charges against *him* also.

"Mr. Hoffman," he said somewhat hotly, "I never have the time for picnics or for dances. The work at the office——"

But Hoffman was not in the least impressed. "Don't be afraid, Valentine, that your merits will not be discovered. You need not enumerate them. I know them all—and still have room for other knowledge in my head."

Harry was breathing hard, indignantly, and far more than a little worried, as his father turned on Valentine. It gave him a second's breathing space.

But it was only a second's lull. His father again advanced on him, upon his face the sour look of a man disgusted. As when he approached within his reach he raised his hand, the boy shrank back. Could his father mean to strike him? But the intention of the elder Hoffman was less brutal, although more insulting. He tapped his son upon the forehead with a hard forefinger—tapped him on the forehead as if he half expected that forehead to ring hollow, like an empty cask.

"And, Harry," he advised with biting malice, "don't you feel too sorry for your father because he knows so much less than you do."

Harry looked at him half angry and half hurt. Suddenly his father towered above him angrily, standing perfectly erect, perhaps rising on his tiptoes. He was always very tall when very angry.

"Go to your work!" he shouted.

As Harry sullenly turned to go, his father whirled on Valentine less fiercely, but not gently. "And you, Valentine, waste no more time. 'Phone Alston to come over. I'm not going to the mill this morning. If he can come, I'd like to see him here. I want to talk to him about that Nelson matter. It's important and annoying and I want to fight them to a finish and have done with it."

"Very well, sir," Valentine replied, "I'll tell him."

Harry was passing blackly from the room and

Valentine fell in behind him, himself frightened, hurt and wondering.

The change in Hoffman fell on him, perhaps, more heavily than on anyone but Anna. He was intensely worried. His employer constantly surprised him. A definite metamorphosis seemed to be in progress in him. Not only was he less good-natured in his business matters, but he seemed to be becoming vain. He was giving to his personal appearance twice the time which he had ever given it before. This morning he was dressed in a new suit, out of the vest of which a brilliant necktie glowed. Valentine wondered if his job could be in danger. He wondered what was working in the old man, anyway.

Ascending the porch-steps, as they went down, they met Bettina, and as Valentine went on, Harry, his face flushed with joy at seeing her, as it had paled with indignation during what he thought his father's unjust criticism, paused to speak with her a moment, unconscious of the fact that Anna, who had heard the sounds of the loud voices from the library and knew that Harry had been scolded, had gone over to the window to watch him as he left—to watch him sympathetically, wondering at his father's harshness.

She saw his face light as he talked with Bettina. She could not see her face, but knew, of course, that she was smiling at him. She could hear their talk quite plainly.

"Barbie told me you weren't up," said Harry.

"I've been up for hours! I read to Mrs. Hoffman

until pretty late, and overslept a little; that's why we missed at breakfast; but I've been out in the garden a long time. It's so lovely—all this—country!"

His face was radiant because she was enjoying life.

Anna noted this with a queer stricture of the heart. She saw, too, that Harry carried something held behind him.

"But you're feeling quite all right, are you?" he asked with real solicitude.

Bettina nodded. Anna could see her face now and she was smiling with a brilliance which seemed something of an affectation, but which evidently passed current with the youth.

"Here you are, then!" He handed her the violets. "The very first of the season. I found them and came back with them for you. I've just been ragged for it—although he doesn't know *why* I came back."

"Oh, thank you so much!" Anna saw Bettina take the flowers and hold them to her face as if she valued them beyond most flowers. There could be no question that the girl was flirting. And if Harry gave her flowers! Could it be possible that Barbie had been right?

"Well, I must hurry on. The governor's in a rage this morning for some reason. I'm going to try to get away for half an hour at noon. I'll be going to the bank. Will you meet me—by the bridge? I'll show you where I found the violets."

She saw Bettina nod, again smiling brilliantly. And as Harry dashed away, pursuing Valentine, she sank back in her chair, amazed and sick at heart. Barbie *had* been right—quite right.

She decided that she must get downstairs some way and talk this over with her husband. Something must be done about it. She was literally horrified. Wearily she started the laborious preparations. She had not been fully dressed for a whole week.

While she was preparing for the trip, a scene progressed down in the library, which would have amazed and startled her far more than had the encounter between Harry and Bettina on the walk. Bettina, strolling, smiling, went into the living-room, staid and quaint with its old furniture, its Dutch stove and its quaint shrine. There apparently to her astonishment, she found Hoffman waiting—the "old gentleman" apparently as eager for her company as the "young gentleman" had been. He went forward to her blithely, not noticing the flowers which she carried in her hand. From his pocket he brought out a bunch of violets and handed them to her in a manner which, half brusque, was still half tender.

"Here are some violets for you. I know you love flowers so."

"Oh, how beautiful!" she cried, and looked up into his eyes.

He smiled, and as he smiled caught sight of those which Harry had bestowed upon her. His face darkened. "But I see you already have some."

She shrugged carelessly. "Oh, these? I just picked them." She dropped them to the table carelessly, but held his in her hand. "I shall wear yours." She gave him a brilliant smile, as she thrust their stems into her belt.

It warmed him—it was plain, indeed, that it pleased

him very much. "Are you quite rested? I know you read to her almost all night." In his tone was definite solicitude.

"Yes, thank you; I'm quite rested." She never failed to use her eyes on him.

"You weren't down at breakfast. It was such a *stupid* meal!" He said this with some emphasis; one could not doubt its genuineness.

She looked up at him coquettishly. "Did you miss me?"

"Did we miss you!" he said fervently. "When I don't see you . . . upon my word I don't see how I've stood it all these years!"

She had begun to smile another sort of smile at him—a slow smile, full of appreciation of his fervent words—when she heard a rustle from the stairs out in the hall. She gave him a warning look and he went quickly to the window, through which the sun was streaming brilliantly. "Mrs. Hoffman's coming," she said very softly.

As Anna entered he turned, smilelessly, to look at her.

"I heard your voice," said she a little wearily, "and thought I would come down."

He made no response, but stood there, grim and silent, in the sunlight. It caught her attention.

"Please draw the curtains, Miss Bettina," she requested. "The sun is shining right upon the carpet and that material fades so. They should not have sold it to me."

Bettina drew the shades without a glance at Hoff-

man, who stood looking at his wife. How different her faded, weary face was from the bright, vivacious countenance of the young woman she was giving orders to! How she had fallen off in looks! What petty things she gave her mind to!

She caught his eyes full on her—rather hard, cold eyes, not at all the kind of eyes a convalescent wishes to be greeted by; but to this she paid slight heed. Fred's eyes were never warm and cordial now, as they once had been.

"Why are you here so late?" she asked without much meaning. He often was there late, these days. She presumed he might be waiting to see Alston. It was easier for the lawyer to meet him at the house than to go out to the mills.

"Valentine and Harry detained me," he said curtly. "But I must go now."

"If you can spare me a few minutes I'd like to talk over a few things——"

"Well, what are they? I haven't much time."

She glanced toward Bettina, as if warning him that she must wait until they were alone. Then, to Bettina: "Miss Curtis, please go over to the grocery. Here is a list of things that I shall want this afternoon."

"I'll go at once, Mrs. Hoffman." The girl spoke submissively, as if half frightened at having been caught with him. "Is there nothing else?"

"No; nothing else." Anna went to the sideboard and fumbled with some napkins till the girl had disappeared.

In the meantime Hoffman waited with impatience.

As she did not speak at once, he grumbled discontentedly: "Well, I'm still here listening; what do you want?"

She was not hurried. She waited until Bettina had had time to leave the house.

"What do you want to talk to me about?" he said again.

"About Harry," she replied, turning to him with a look of worry. "Fred, things cannot go on this way."

He seemed to be impressed. "I told him that a moment ago." His voice raised, complaining of the boy. "That youngster has no taste for business. He has no ambition whatsoever."

"Yes, yes, Fred; but that's not what I mean. It's something else that——" She stopped short.

"What is it?" he said grumpily. "What do you mean? You know how I hate this beating around the bush."

"I mean—that girl must leave the house."

He looked at her in almost dumb surprise. What had Bettina got to do with Harry? He could not believe his ears. "Which girl?"

"Why, you know—Bettina."

"Bettina!" he exclaimed incredulously. "On account of *Harry?*"

"You must have observed what is going on between the two——"

"Between the two—between Harry and Bettina? Why, you're crazy!" Had she brought some charge against Bettina on his own account—why, he would have tried to bluff it down. But to link Bettina with

his son—young jackanapes! It was absurd. He began to pace the floor in nervous rage. If there was anything between those two——

"Fred, don't get so excited. How nervous you are lately! Nothing has happened as yet, but——"

He whirled on her. Was she insane or was he dreaming? "As yet? Then you believe there might——"

"Yes; and we must put a stop to it, that's all. Barbie has warned me. She has told me more than once: 'Keep your eyes on the young gentleman!' "

If all this should be true! It nonplussed and dismayed him. "Well, why *didn't* you, then? Why didn't you keep your eyes on him? Why should you permit——"

"Keep cool, Fred," she said soothingly. "It's not too late. I heard them talking just outside and he gave her some violets."

He looked at her rather stupidly. "Gave her some violets? Harry did, you say?"

"Yes, I heard them talking. And it's not gone very far. She's merely trying for him. She has not yet wholly dazzled him.

"Dazzled—Harry?"

"I can put an end to it. I'm going to discharge her."

He rose in arms at this. "You're going to discharge—Bettina?" Even if all she said was true, if Harry had given her some violets and she had overheard them talking on the porch—what of it? Bettina could not stop the boy from giving violets

to her. "Is it *her* fault that he runs after her? That young scamp—behind my back!"

Neither he nor Anna caught the hidden meaning of this last earnest exclamation.

Suddenly he reached for his hat. "Well, I'll go down to the factory and see him. He's probably got there by this time. He spends no more time there than he's compelled to. I'm going to tell him that he's got to leave this house if he doesn't let that girl alone! *He*—not she! She is perfectly innocent in the matter; I'm convinced of that."

Anna shook her head. "Well, I'm not so sure of it." She paused then in thought. She wanted to be fair. She always wanted to be fair. "I don't know that, really, she can be blamed. She's a poor girl and our Harry would be a fine match for her to make. It is only natural that she should try to win him."

Hoffman looked at her with smoldering eyes. His wrath was fully roused. He would not have his son step in, and——

His thoughts came up with a round turn. Step in and—what? He could not answer that. What had he, himself, been thinking of in connection with Bettina? Nor could he answer that.

Things suddenly had come to a strange crisis. He was bewildered, and he was very angry—especially at Harry, but in a lesser degree at Anna. For some reason her pale face and evidently weakened step did not rouse his sympathy, as once such signs would have. He looked at her with that distaste which

had so often filled his heart of late when he observed her. How pale she was—how weary-looking—and—how old! She had never taken any care of her own looks, as other women did, he disapprovingly reflected.

But principally his hot wrath rose at Harry. "He'll find that I have something to say about what he is doing!" he declared. "If he should do such a foolish thing—if he should ever marry her—then let him shift for himself! Not a penny shall he ever get from me! Not a red penny! I want you to tell him that—and I will!" He jammed his hat upon his head and strode away.

Anna looked after him in weary disappointment. He had not even tried to help her out of the perplexing problem in which she found herself involved. He seemed, somehow, to blame her. Well, perhaps it was her fault. She, not he, had brought the girl into the house. He had not wished to have her send for anyone to help her. But why should he have tried, as he had tried, to defend Bettina against Harry? Oh, she could not comprehend him these days!

She let her head drop to her hand and sat wondering why life, thus late in their affairs, had suddenly become so complicated.

Barbie came to ask if she should roast a breast of veal which had come up, or make chops of it.

"Do as you think best, Barbie."

This was unlike Mrs. Hoffman. Her orders always were explicit, competent and detailed. Barbie ventured toward her.

"You ought not to have come down, Mrs. Hoffman. You don't look well at all."

"I don't know what's the matter with me. My knees tremble and my head aches so!"

The old servant was concerned. "Let me mix and boil an old cure for you. Real old country cure. It's a sort of plaster—but you can swallow part of it. It's the greatest thing for chills and fever, Mrs. Hoffman" (she waxed eager in her recommendation), "and it's good for sprains and burns and headache, lameness and the cholera morbus."

Anna smiled up at her. "I'm not so sick as that, Barbie." Then she confided in her. "My dear Barbie, I *am* worried about Harry."

Barbie showed no signs of surprise. Instead she wisely shook her head. Hadn't she that very morning told her? "What did I say, Mrs. Hoffman? Is *that* what we've worked so hard for? Is it for *her* that we have kept this house in such fine order? What? For *that* kind of a daughter-in-law?" She sniffed scornfully.

"It hasn't come to that, yet."

But Barbie was by no means sure that it had not. "Is *she* going to spread herself around here? Is *she* going to handle all our silver as if it were her own. Is *she* going to ruin our fine linen? She don't know a thing about good linen! The things she brought from home were all as yellow—or else gray—and you know what *that* means." She burst into a wail. "Oh, what a trouble children are! Mercy, mercy—what a

misfortune!" She clasped her hands and waved upon her feet, moaning her despair.

It shook Anna's nerves. "If you can't talk sensibly," she said, "I won't have another word to say to you."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" moaned Barbie.

"Stop that bawling!" cried the distracted woman.

"When a person is as wrapped up in a family as I have been in this one—and to live to see such a calamity! Our fine young Mr. Harry! Oh——"

"Harry will have to listen to reason," Anna firmly commented. "His father sees this matter just as I do. We simply shall not tolerate it. He just now threatened to disown him if he should prove obstinate."

This did not comfort Barbara; it added to her woe. "Oh, my! Oh, my! What a misfortune! What a misfortune!"

Anna, as she looked at her, out of patience, chanced to let her eyes glance through the window and saw Bettina coming. She put her hand on Barbie's arm, urging her to quiet. "Here she comes," she whispered. "I'll speak to her at once. Go, Barbie."

But Barbie stood and moaned. "You wouldn't listen to me. I told you long ago! Nothing now will do the least good in the world!"

"Yes, dear; this time you were right," said Anna soothingly. She patted her to urge her into quiet. "Go now, please."

"You wouldn't listen! You wouldn't listen! You wouldn't listen!" Barbie moaned as she shuffled toward the kitchen.

Bettina came in blithely. She had some letters in

her hand and a small parcel. She laid the parcel on the table and went through the letters. "I brought the mail."

"Thank you," said Anna, taking what she held out to her, but not looking at it. Instead she laid it on the table and gazed steadfastly and somewhat wonderingly at Bettina, till Bettina raised her eyes from contemplation of three letters which she still had in her hand. They were addressed in her own large and full handwriting and she knew them to be from Sevigny.

"Miss Curtis, please sit down a moment. I would like to speak to you."

Instantly the girl was ill at ease. What could be coming? Had Mrs. Hoffman overheard what her husband had that morning said to her? Or had she guessed that Harry had been making love to her? She really was frightened. "Mrs. Hoffman!"

"My dear child," said Anna calmly, "I'm very sorry to have to tell you, but I must. I—I have come to the conclusion that my house is really not quite a suitable place for you."

Bettina was still more alarmed. "Mrs. Hoffman, what am I to understand by that?"

Anna looked up at her briefly; she had some napkins in her hand which needed mending, and she gave her principal attention to them.

"You have no opportunity to make use of your talents here," she said kindly, but unfalteringly. "You play the piano, you sing prettily, you read aloud quite charmingly. You should try to get a place as com-

panion somewhere in a city. For my household you are really not fitted."

"Mrs. Hoffman, have I been lacking in willingness, or diligence?"

"It's not that. But you have not the proper qualifications for such a hundrum life. You don't care at all for housework, and I can't blame you for it. You were brought up to different things. And you are a pretty girl—you must take care of your beauty." Anna's tones were wholly matter of fact and placid.

Bettina was dismayed. Was she to be turned away just as things were shaping up into—she knew not what—but something, anyway, which might be advantageous? "Oh, please!" she pleaded.

"You seem to be afraid," said Anna, "that the least bit of sunshine will ruin your complexion. Summer is coming here and there will be work in the garden and among the flowers. I love to do such work; whoever I have with me should care about such work. You never do the slightest thing without first putting on your gloves." She shook her head. "No, you see, I need a *plain* woman to assist me."

"But——"

"I will pay you your salary for three months; you can go back to your mother and there look about. It will enable you to wait without real inconvenience until you can find some other and better position."

Bettina's face was ashen. "Everyone will ask me why I had to leave here so soon."

"I will give you a good recommendation."

Bettina saw her dreams all vanishing as if by some

malevolent magic. It seemed incredible. It must not be! She held her hands out pleadingly. "Do keep me. I—beg of you!"

Anna shook her head.

"Let me stay over the summer, Mrs. Hoffman!" As she spoke the thought of the hot city rose into her mind—the clanging of the trolley-cars, the raucous notes of motors, the shouting of the playing children, and far more than these things, the sordid hot uncomfortable rooms of the crowded little flat, her mother's constant plaints, her drunken stepfather, the occasional visits of her brother when he happened to be "broke," the cheap love-affairs and furtive sweethearts of her little sister, the unceasing smell of cooking surging from their own kitchen and by way of shafts from other kitchens through the house.

And all her dreams to go! The old gentleman—she had not known, that morning, exactly what to make of him, to think about his fervor, although often she had wondered if she had not—possibly—well, he had money, anyway! And Harry! She really was rather fond of Harry!

"Please let me stay!" she pleaded.

Anna shook her head.

"Do keep me!"

It did not once occur to her that she was begging this gray woman for the privilege of staying there and wrecking her; she did not consider her at all; she thought only of herself and the black ruin which so unexpectedly seemed now to threaten all her plans.

Again Anna shook her head.

"Not just through the summer, Mrs. Hoffman? It is so much easier to find a position in the fall." Oh, how she hated her for forcing her to beg! How she would love to be revenged in some way! "Please —just through the summer!"

"I have told you that I will give you three months' salary. That will cover the whole summer. Let's not argue any longer."

Bettina now saw that her case was hopeless with this horrible old woman. She faced her sharply, drawing up and pulling off her gloves—the gloves to which this arrogant housekeeper so objected.

Her voice became impertinent and sharpened in its inflections. "What offense have I committed that you send me away like this at a moment's notice?"

"I have not said that you have committed any offense."

"You cannot discharge me without a reason."

Anna looked at her with some astonishment—the girl's demeanor had so changed. She was no longer pleading, but accusing. "I am not obliged to state my reason."

Bettina glared at her. "I shall look to Mr. Hoffman for justice," she exclaimed.

Anna spoke very calmly. "To my husband? He never interferes in my affairs."

"Surely he would——"

"I employ the servants and I discharge them according to *my* pleasure." Anna interrupted quietly, but very firmly, very coldly.

"I am *not* a servant!" cried Bettina haughtily.

"You are in my service and you will do well not to forget that."

"Mr. Hoffman would not allow me to be treated in this manner."

"Kindly leave my husband entirely out of this. I should advise you not to appeal to him. He can be very disagreeable when annoyed about trifles."

Bettina almost sneered at her. "Well, we'll see whether he thinks this is a trifle!"

Anna showed increased surprise and more reproof. "That is not the proper tone for you to assume toward me."

Bettina whirled upon her angrily, infuriated, like a cat. "Why not? You're not a queen, or a princess —you are merely Mrs. Hoffman, the wife of your husband. You are nothing more than that!"

Suddenly, white and very angry, but entirely self-repressed, Anna took her mending basket and rose slowly. "But if I am my husband's wife, even though nothing more, I at least have the privilege of ordering impertinent persons out of my house."

She walked across the room without another glance at the infuriated girl.

"If you do you will regret it!" cried Bettina fiercely.

To the threat Anna paid not the least attention. "Miss Curtis," she said slowly, "the east-bound train leaves at exactly noon. In three quarters of an hour—at eleven—the man will come to take you to the station. Have your trunk quite ready, please, a little in advance."

She vanished through the door into the hall.

CHAPTER VIII

For an instant Bettina stood in dismayed silence. This seemed beyond belief. Her wrath was boundless, her chagrin unfathomable.

Were all the nebulous plans which she had been so sedulously forcing into definite form to thus be brought to naught? Had she wasted all these months there in that poky little town? Was she, a really accomplished young woman of the world, to thus be beaten by a country-woman who had lived her life in a small city—almost in the rural districts—who wore dowdy clothes and didn't know it, lived in a hair-cloth furnished house, made of herself a housekeeper and little else, and was contented to remain, thus suffering the gibes of a disgruntled, disillusioned husband, without the least conception of how to get his love back? Was she to be outgeneraled by one who spent her days in darning napkins, counting table-cloths, poring over house-accounts and seeing to it that some twelve or fourteen rooms were aired?

She could see no way out of it, and moved dejectedly toward the hall door, intending to go up and pack her things. Anna's manner had been really impressive. She had seemed a really terrible old woman as, utterly unruffled, she had practically ordered her out of the house. For the first time in her

life Bettina had been made to feel distinctly small and mean—and it had been this country-woman who had worked the miracle! How she hated her for it!

Walking slowly, thoughtfully, infuriated because her desperate thinking gave her no suggestion of a way out of the difficulty, she was about to start up the hall stairs, to actually do as she had been so firmly bidden, when, from a distance, she heard whistling. It gave her new life. She stopped furtively and listened—stopped as might a beautiful she-hound about to leave the hunt discouraged, when she gets an unexpected scent of quarry. She knew that whistle very well. It was Harry's.

Listening, she was stricken by an inspiration. She went quickly to the window, through which Anna had been fearful that the sun would fade the carpet, moved one side of the curtain with the utmost care, peered out. Then she hurried to the door which led to the side hall, through which he would be sure to enter, and placed it half a foot ajar. This done, she hurried to a chair by the great mahogany reading table, which was supported by such grewsome claws that when she had first sat down at it, she had been involuntarily nervous lest they come to life and seize her feet. Bowing her head upon her folded arms she now began to sob with violence, not noisily, but audibly enough to surely make herself heard in the side hall.

She was thus placed, thus sobbing, when Harry reached the slightly open door. He did not fail to hear her and, hearing her, peered anxiously within. Seeing who it was that thus repined, he thrust the

door wide open, and, in two strides, was at her side.

"Bettina!" he exclaimed. "For heaven's sake, what is the matter?"

She did not even raise her head, but sobbed with new abandon of wild grief.

"Tell me! What has happened?"

Still she did not answer, but sobbed on.

"Please!"

With an evident effort she composed herself to broken speech. "To be driven away—like a—thief!" she cried in bitter gasps.

"Who?" said the amazed and startled boy. "Who drives you away, Bettina?"

"Your—mother."

Harry was incredulous. "What? Mother?"

Her wrath rose again and she stopped sobbing. Looking up, her face flushed vividly, her hair a little disarranged, her fists clenched, she made a very charming fury. "Yes, your mother! She's ordered me out of the house! I am instantly to pack my things—and go!" Then, as he stood speechless, gazing at her: "What did you come back for?"

"Father sent me for some papers. But why has mother done this? Tell me—why?"

She dropped her head and sobbed again. He looked down at her compassionately, watching her shaking shoulders with deep sorrow in his youthful, earnest, handsome eyes. He could not understand this thing.

"Why?" he repeated.

"Why?" she sobbed. "On your account. She thinks—I think she must think—that there is some-

thing wrong between us. No one seems to believe in me. And I—am a poor girl—who has nothing in this whole wide world—but her good name! If they —take that away from me—why, I shall have to die! I couldn't live—a minute!"

"Bettina!" he gasped, horrified. "No one would dare——"

"I have no father to defend me," she sobbed on effectively. "I am alone and unprotected."

This stirred him, roused the manhood in him. "No; not unprotected," he declaimed. "I will protect you against the whole world."

"But not against your mother," she said weakly, although she managed to look up, so that she might catch the look on the boy's face.

"Even against her," he bravely cried. Then, warmly and sincerely, bending over her, his face burning with emotion: "Oh, Bettina! I love you above everything. I've—often told you so. Won't you believe me now?"

"How can I," she said sadly. "You treat this as a little love affair—as a mere passing fancy! Why should I believe your intentions to be honorable?"

"The most honorable in the world!" he said with fervor, meaning every syllable of it, as she well knew. "I'll go to mother at once. She must set this right."

"No!" said Bettina, rising proudly. "Do you think I would spend another night in the house from which I have been ordered to go? No! I have some pride! I am going to go."

Harry did not hesitate an instant. "Then you shall go only as my wife!"

Arrested in her progress toward the door, she turned, looked at him uncertainly, then flung herself into his arms. "Harry!" she exclaimed as if in ecstasy. "Harry!"

He was beside himself with joy. He threw his arms about her, kissing her ecstatically. "Bettina! Oh, my own Bettina!"

However, she looked up quickly from his shoulder. Transports are delightful, but there are other things than momentary joy to be considered in this world, as none knew better than herself. "But what will your father say?"

There was gloom in Harry's answer, but there was determination, too. Indeed, the boy was rather fine just then, despite his youth, despite his innocence. "Oh, father's certain to be *furious!* He has sworn already that he'll disinherit me if I make you my wife. Barbie told me."

Bettina first grew grave and then grew cool. She had no desire to be the heroine of a romance like that. She had read in the newspapers about too many of them. They did not work out well for the woman in the case.

"Is that true?"

Harry's voice was full of thrills, of firm resolve, of manly independence. "Oh, it's nothing! We are young; we'll make our *own* way in the world."

She had lost much of her enthusiasm and drew back from him a little.

"Won't we, Bettina?"

She answered doubtfully, dodging a direct reply: "Y e s—but surely he—your father—could not entirely forsake you!"

"Couldn't!" Harry gave a careless little laugh. "You don't know him. He has a will of iron. He would never help me, even if for years he saw me struggling for a pittance."

A queer change appeared upon his darling's face. Slowly she put his arms away from her. Gradually she drew away from him. "Struggling for a—pittance! But—how are we going to live?" The last six words came rapidly.

Harry, however, intoxicated by the wine of his enthusiasm, was in a state of exaltation. He looked across her shoulder into the illimitable future. "And I want nothing from him! If he is hard-hearted enough to destroy my happiness, let him keep his money!"

He made a striking spectacle of high-minded youth as he delivered this, but Bettina was not thinking of fine spectacles. She had no wish to spring out of the frying pan into the fire. What she had come to seek was not a disinherited son, but a rich man. Still, she felt that she must withdraw gracefully.

"No, Harry; no!" she said with a fine air of resignation and self-sacrifice. "You must not break with your parents upon my account."

"Bettina!" he cried impulsively, anxious to impress her with the fact that he cared nothing for the balance

of the world, and not a little worried by the startling change in her.

"You must forget me. It is for the best."

"No. . . . No!"

She backed away from his entreating arms. "Forget me, Harry! Ah—good-by!" Now she definitely turned away and started once more toward the hall.

"Bettina," he implored, "I—I forget you! I am going to my parents and announce our engagement this very moment!"

This time she could not stop him, much as she desired to. But as he was rushing from the room, he met his father at the threshold. That stopped him. Harry startled, but not weakening; Hoffman's face unpleasantly illumined by that sarcastic glow with which, not infrequently, of late, he had regarded his only son.

"Father," said the boy after an uncomfortable silence, during which the flush upon his face changed into a deep, brick-red, "mother said——"

His father's look of cold, calm disapproval stopped him.

"What?" The word came sharply. "What did she say?"

"Mother has discharged Miss Curtis," the boy blurted.

Now Hoffman showed real interest. Incredulity and wrath were blended on his face. *"What?"*

It gave Harry courage. "Yes; discharged her without a moment's notice." He paused to let this take effect, while Hoffman's lowering brow grew darker

with its wrath. "But I will not let her be treated in such a manner."

His father whirled on him—he had been gazing at Bettina. "What have you got to do with it?"

"Miss Curtis," said the infatuated and brave-hearted boy, "is under my protection."

For a second Hoffman stared in genuine unbelief. Then he spoke in tones which voiced disgusted wrath. "Get back to the factory! Don't meddle in affairs that don't concern you! Whoever is in my house is under *my* protection!"

Bettina, worried lest the boy now spoil her re-made plans with too much talking—indeed, very badly frightened—filled with a new hope born of Hoffman's glances toward her, went to the lad pleadingly. "Go, Harry! Leave this to me."

His eyes were on his father. He was undecided what to do. He thought that probably Bettina would be cleverer than he, yet it seemed to him unmanly to leave her there alone with the very evidently, very angry Hoffman. "But—father——"

"Later—later," urged Bettina.

"Father," said the boy, half disregarding her, "you must let me speak to you at once."

"Not another word," his father thundered. "Go!"

And when Harry started once again to speak, he cast the word a second time at him, as if it might have been a missile.

There was no use in staying, and of this Harry was aware. Bettina might do something; he could not. He threw Hoffman one glance of defiance and

left them together, his heart bursting with the indignation in it, his brain full of mighty plans, his soul stirred to its depths.

As soon as he had disappeared, Bettina, without words, started very humbly toward the hall.

"Where are you going?" Hoffman asked, puzzled by the whole extraordinary situation.

Her manner had changed wholly. Now she was the injured maiden, crushed, submitting, perforce, to great injustice, which she had no strength to combat. "I am going to pack my trunk."

He went to her and caught her arm. "What do you mean? You don't want to go."

"Who cares what I want? Mrs. Hoffman commands and I must obey."

"It's true, then, that she has dismissed you?"

A little indignation marked her answering voice and gesture—but more hopeless helplessness. "Not that. She simply—throws me out of the house!"

He was dumfounded. "Throws you out? I'm sure it is a misunderstanding."

She laughed sorrily. "Mrs. Hoffman spoke plainly enough. I must be gone by ten o'clock." She turned again to go. "So please don't detain me, or I won't be able to finish packing." Then she cried indignantly: "And I ask you, please, to have Mrs. Hoffman search my trunk before I lock it so that she will be sure I haven't stolen anything!"

He would not let her go. The whole thing seemed to him beyond belief. "Come, tell me," he urged. He led her to a chair and gently forced her into it.

"What has happened? You're completely upset. Has my wife expressed any such suspicions? Has she—insulted you?"

Bettina's throat worked as if endeavoring to choke back sobs. "Oh—no. She merely spoke as the lady of the house *may* speak—to a servant!"

"She has hurt your feelings." His voice was a comforter's. "I can see that." Then his manner became definitely fatherly. "But I will not let anyone treat you unjustly."

She looked at him with swimming eyes in which blind confidence was very prettily expressed. Her trust in him, indeed, seemed almost childlike. "Mr. Hoffman, you are just—I know that." She slowly shook her head. "But you can't do anything for me in this matter."

"And why not?"

"Mrs. Hoffman tells me that she hires the—servants—and discharges them; that with them she does as she pleases and that no one has a right to interfere."

The strong stubbornness which was a dominant characteristic of the man rose in his face, while his lifelong intolerance of the surrender of any part of his command was expressed as plainly by his compressed, silent lips as it could have been had they used words to tell it.

He crossed the room, found a chair and brought it to her side, not sitting in it, but leaning on its back. Finally: "Well, that's news to me! I'll see whether I really have no right to interfere! I'll learn whether I am master in my house or not! If you have been

wronged I'll see to it that you have justice. You may rely upon it."

He left the chair which, with such pains, he had borne across the room, and began to pace the floor with slow, firm strides, his face even harder than it had been.

Rising, she went pleadingly to him. "Oh, please don't! Why bother about me? I'm only a poor servant—Mrs. Hoffman is quite right. I wouldn't, for the world, cause any trouble here—where I have been so happy! I had believed myself protected by the good—the strong. Why, I had quite forgotten that I'm but a stranger here!"

Now the sobs again came and she buried her face in her hands as she hurried to the chair beside the table and bowed her head upon it while her shoulders shook in an apparent agony.

It mastered him. Deeply moved, he pushed her hands down gently and then took her face between his hands. Presently he began to gently stroke her hair. "Oh, my child! My dear child! I am grieved! I'm deeply grieved!"

Through her tears she smiled at him.

Now he paced the floor again, thinking tensely. "I simply cannot understand my wife. It must be because of Harry. In that they're all alike. The lioness defending her cubs!"

She looked at him with understanding, even nodding. "I know of what I am accused—that Harry is in love with me. Heaven knows it's not my fault! I have not encouraged him."

He went to her and took her hands, smiling at her.

"Ah, but why are you so pretty, Bettina? That youngster has good eyes—he has them from his father!" He pinched her cheek with playful tenderness. "It's quite natural." Then again he took on his determination. "But you shall not be made to suffer for it—not *you.*" The implication was that dreadful things were held in store for others.

She extended both her hands to him with a fine gesture of deep gratitude. "*You* believe in me?" Her face was radiant, as if it did not matter what the whole world thought if only he believed in her.

"Indeed I do." His smile of confidence was fine and full.

Then she accused: "And yet—you threatened to disown your son if he should marry me!"

He looked at her in blank astonishment.

"He told me so himself a little while ago."

He still seemed bewildered and incredulous.

"But don't be afraid. I have refused him. Only—don't think that I did so from—fear." She spoke up with fine spirit. "Were I in love, I'd fear no one. But I do not love your son, and" (she used her eyes with startling eloquence) "I'll marry no man unless I love him." With this her glance dropped quickly as if she were abashed.

Again he took her hands. His face had flushed. Extraordinary thoughts were plainly rushing through his brain. He spoke thickly, for the spell of her was on him. "And could you really love—with all your heart—Bettina?"

"Ah—could I?" Her voice seemed vibrant with

deep passion. "Yes—yes—yes—with all my heart—with all my soul! . . . *That's* how I could love!"

"How you say that! Do you—love someone now?" His grip upon her hand was almost painful.

She simulated fright. "Please let me go! I——"

He was very much aroused. "No; you must tell me the truth!" Then, very gently: "Won't you confide in me?"

She spoke so softly that he could scarcely catch her words—yet he could catch them: "In anyone else—but not—in you!"

The effect was not as instantaneous as she had hoped. He led her to a chair, into which she limply sank, and he stood, bending over her. "What? You don't trust me? Come! I'm your friend. I'm like a—father. Let me advise you—help you."

"No one can help me," she said slowly. "I must bear my sorrow—all alone. There can be no happiness for me—in this world!"

This intensified his tenderness. "Don't say that—Bettina."

She shook her head, as if in weariness of soul, as if in utter abnegation of all hope forever.

"No happiness for you?" he went on thickly, but with growing speed of speech. "You don't know how—attached—*I* have become to you in these few months! I—don't want to appear—ridiculous—to speak of love—for a young girl who could easily be my daughter, but, believe me, I have never felt toward anybody as I feel toward you."

Her head sank lower as if she wished to hide her face from him.

"For weeks," he went on softly, "I've been going around as if in a fever." His voice became impassioned, fervent. "A hundred times I've said to myself: 'Old man, old man, be sensible!' But it is of no use. It has taken hold. It won't let go of me. I cannot get rid of it."

She had listened breathlessly to what he had been saying. As soon as she was sure his face was turned away from her (as if in shame) she looked at him—looked up at him with eyes filled with delight, almost with incredulity. Her countenance was alight with triumph. But it was buried in her hands before he turned again toward her.

"I suppose you find me very ridiculous," he murmured. "You are laughing at me. Go on—laugh! I deserve it."

Now her extraordinary, facile face seemed tremulous with happiness, her eyes were shining, her mouth drooped, but seemed to smile with joy unutterable.

"Yes; I wish to laugh," she said. "I wish to laugh —because I am—so happy!"

For an instant incredulity combated the joy which marked his face. Then he crushed her hands against his breast. "Bettina!"

"Can it be true," she said with closed eyes, softly, "that you love me?"

"I—don't like to speak that word. It—sounds almost grotesque at my age. Yet, if I were younger—only a few years younger—Bettina——" He held her very close and looked into her eyes.

"But—you are not free!" The words came softly, but were brimming with significance.

He dropped her hands and left her, going slowly to the window where he stood looking out unseeing. After a moment of reflection he returned to her with a dull gloom upon his face. "No—that's true—a wife and children—they have rights."

Again he paused, but this time looked into her face. Fierce agitation swept him. She said absolutely nothing. She was waiting.

"But I, too, have rights," he cried. "I have worked for my family all my life. I have a right to demand some happiness for myself!"

He held her hands, but did not draw her to him, although she would have flown again into his arms.

"Are you sure, Bettina, that there is no one else you care for?"

She shook her head. "No! No!"

But she was no longer yielding. Suddenly she moved as if to dart away from him and he gripped her hand with a new force.

"No, Bettina? No?" he cried. "Do you want to drive me mad?" His hands were trembling now with his excitement, his face was flushed with the desire in it.

"Let me go!" she whispered. "It is better. Ah—I see it now!"

But she did not go. She drew closer to him, turning her face up to him, within her eyes the wistful look of a self-sacrificing child.

"Oh, but I cannot bear to be unhappy! I was not born to—to—renounce! Every drop of blood in

me cries out against it! I am young! I want to live! I want to be happy!"

"And I! I see in you the happiness that I have missed." His voice shook; his whole body trembled. "No one shall take you from me!"

Now he dropped his arms and fell into deep thought, while she stood agitated, looking at him.

"Nobody shall be treated unfairly," he said slowly. "Nobody."

Then, after another instant's thought, evidently arriving at a clear decision, he said sharply:

"Go upstairs and pack your things."

Bettina did not move.

"And—have faith in me."

Without another word she started from him, but at the door she paused to look back at him radiantly. "My—own!" she murmured softly.

"NO ONE SHALL TAKE YOU FROM ME!" *p.* 218.

CHAPTER IX

After a lingering look into his eyes she ran upstairs, upon her face a conflict of emotions mirrored. Triumph was there, and, as she thought of Anna Hoffman, satisfied revenge. Exultant avarice was there, and vanity unleashed. Varying phases of her mental tumult were reflected in the little looking-glass above the dresser in the comfortable room which Anna had assigned to her. Surely a strange "companion" she had been—strangely disloyal, strangely ungrateful, strangely fatal to the happiness of the woman who had hired her.

But of all her varying emotions not one hinted (now that she was quite alone) of the passion which had seemed to burn deep in her eyes, which apparently had made her full lips soft and yearning, which had appeared to underlie the heaving of her bosom, to animate the clinging of her arms, when she had been below with Anna Hoffman's husband.

Instead, through all the fast play of her mobile features one detail dominated, the detail of a subtle sneer. It was not definite; she was unconscious of it; even in her heart she was not, at the moment, quite scornful of the man whom she had sworn she loved; she valued him too highly, but the value which she

placed on him was not the value which a maiden places on her suitor, it was not even that which mistresses place on their lovers. It was, rather, something close akin to that which merchants place upon some new, attractive treasure promising profit, which an employer may place upon a coveted new member of a working staff. She had achieved an asset.

Already, as she threw her things—her scant and difficultly won wardrobe, her sparse and tawdry toilet silver, her few inexpensive decorative knick-knacks—into her cheap trunk, she was imagining great wardrobe trunks to come, to be crammed full of marvels from the shops along Fifth Avenue; as she swiftly slipped out of her house-gown and revealed coarse linen, purchased ready-made in a department store, she looked into the mirror and saw a vision of her satiny form encased in silks and laces, Paris-wrought; as she stooped to catch a garter on a cotton stocking, she held out the shapely limb, despite her sense of need for haste, and gloated as she thought of it in heavily embroidered weaves of silk. Catching her inexpensive traveling-dress about her deftly, fastening its loops and buttons with sure, speedy fingers, she imagined it as being altered for her little sister, while she went to Redfern, or, at other smart, expensive shops, ordered marvelous, glove-fitting walking gowns.

Upon the eve of a momentous step—upon the eve of marriage—each girl must naturally think about her mother. A mother forms a lovely subject for soft contemplation—those maidenly reflections of a budding girl whose bridal is approaching, concerning her

whose bridal found fruition in her own appearance in the world, are storied as the holiest of reveries.

Bettina now thought of her mother. But she did not think of her as tremulously fearful, tearful, anxious, full of sage advice and loving kindness when she heard the great announcement—instead she saw her face aglow with satisfaction purely mercenary as she discussed the fortune of her daughter's capture; she saw her eyes alight with cold, hard, calculating cleverness as she helped plan the legal battle which must certainly be fought and won before Bettina gave herself to her—beloved. For Bettina Curtis, even though in Fred's impassioned love he may have thought quite differently, had not the least intention of making a mis-step so great as it would be to grant him any privileges before the vows were said. The beginning, truly, had been tumultuous and sudden, but every other step must be accompanied by strict conventionality—that sad conventionality which in these days so often masks such tragedies as in the olden times were not merely psychological, pathetic, but brutal, bloody, dourly tragic.

She was ready for the motor when it came for her, as Anna had directed; as Hoffman gravely handed her into it—he felt that this attention would, in a way, rebuke his wife for what she had intended—and gave the man explicit orders to look after her with care, to see to the purchase of her ticket, to attend to careful checking of her trunk, to render her as many services as he or she could think of, she felt a little fear. What if he should reconsider after

all? But the thick envelope which he secretly passed to her—softly thick and full, she knew, of money—and his statement that in it she would find certain carefully detailed suggestions which he had prepared while she had been upstairs renewed her courage, and she smiled brilliant thanks.

"Run back to the garage and get the other robe," he told the man. "This one is in tatters."

"But Mrs. Hoffman said——"

"Go back to the garage and get that robe!" commanded Hoffman. "No; don't run the car back. Get out, and go and get that robe."

Trembling for his place because of the chill emphasis in his employer's words, the cold dissatisfaction in his eyes, the brutal arrogance of his demeanor, the man sprang from the motor and made haste to do as he was bidden.

"There's money in that envelope," said Hoffman quickly, but not nervously, when they were left alone. "Use it as you like. I'll send you more, of course. Get yourself such things as you will want for the—for the——"

She nodded. She knew that he was trying to say "marriage," but could not bring his lips to it. She did not resent the fact that they rebelled.

"I shall arrange things here as speedily as possible. I don't know how long it will take. Alston will push things through for me, I know. He will object, but I can force him to it when he finds it is the only way."

She nodded speechlessly. She had suddenly grown frightened as she had never been before. Every mo-

ment she expected to see Anna Hoffman's questioning face appear at the glass door which opened on the porch. She felt certain that in case it came she would spring from the motor and run madly—anywhere—to get away from it. She tried to summon to her aid her customary self-control, but could not do it.

"Yes; yes," she said in agony. "And—thank you for the money. But—oh, why doesn't he make haste? I shall miss my train."

"I think you'll get it. If you miss it he will take you across country to the other road. I have given him instructions." He turned his head as he heard the garage door close. "And above all things remember what I said there in the house. 'Have faith—in me.'"

Now, when the chauffeur was approaching, she calmed. She gave the man who leaned upon the tonneau door a brilliant smile. "Oh—I have! I have!"

"And want for nothing," he managed to continue, before the chauffeur came to hearing distance. "Use the money freely. There'll be more. I love you. I wish you to be happy."

"You are—wonderful!" she whispered as the man came up.

Hoffman stood on the side porch as they swept out of the yard, and, as she looked back at him, smiled gravely.

He was not bad looking in the least she mused—not bad looking for his age; and the envelope of

money had been thoughtful; the promise to send more was an indication that he would be generous in future. Well out of the grounds she settled back into the cushions with a smile. She even laughed a little, audibly, but checked the impulse quickly. She did not wish to have the chauffeur hear her shout with glee.

But—ah, Anna Hoffman, who was mistress of the situation now? She pressed the envelope of money tight between her slim, gloved hands. How wonderful it was!

After she had gone, Hoffman went slowly into the house and stood, wrapped in deep thought, in the dim library. His face was knotted, as it always was when he was working out some abstruse, puzzling business problem. He was concentrating, with the last ounce of his fierce intensity, upon the puzzle which confronted him. At length he called to Barbie.

"Yes, Mr. Hoffman," she said timidly, as she came in. His temper was not likely to be smoother than it usually was upon a day when such portentous and disturbing things had happened in the house.

"Call Mrs. Hoffman," he said briefly. "I wish to speak to her."

This frightened her beyond the power of a reply, for at a time when Anna was but newly convalescent, even Frederick Hoffman would ordinarily have gone up to her, if he had things he wished to talk about.

She hurried voiceless to obey his order and presently his wife came down to him—placid, wholly undisturbed.

"Did you tell Barbie that you wished to see me?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

He found it difficult to make a start, but mastered his embarrassment with a firm effort of his iron will. "Anna, you have caused a great deal of trouble today."

She seemed surprised. "I? In what way?"

"You allowed yourself to be carried away by temper and you were entirely too hard on that poor girl. She——"

"I suppose you mean Miss Curtis," she said calmly. "Then she has complained about it."

His embarrassment still troubled him. "No; but I know exactly what happened."

"Well, then, the incident is closed." Anna did not even look at him, but, sitting at a table, took her darning-basket from it and began to search its contents.

He found words constantly more difficult of selection, but he held to his purpose grimly. "Sometimes, Anna, a small spark may cause a frightful explosion."

She looked up at him in mild astonishment. "What do you mean?"

"You shouldn't have done that." It was difficult to keep his voice from shaking with the emphasis which tried to creep into his words and which he struggled to keep out of them.

"I shouldn't have done what?"

He was trembling now; her calm at last infuriated

him. That made his words come easier. "You have thrown a spark into a barrel of powder."

"I don't understand you."

Now the leash broke. His voice rose accusingly, complainingly. "No; that's it! You don't understand me, and you have never understood me. Our—characters—are essentially different."

Still she was undisturbed. Of late there had been so many outbursts from him that a new one failed to stir her. She spoke only kindly, utterly unconscious of the impending tragedy. "Fred, I think we have been as happy as most people."

He threw his hands into the air in helpless protest at her denseness and strode back and forth across the room.

"Where is there a marriage free from storms?" she went on smoothly. "And now that we are both growing old——"

Again that word "old" touched him. He stopped before her angrily. "I am not the—'old gentleman'—that all of you in this house are trying to make me."

She looked up, really surprised by the fierce vehemence of his denial.

"There are a great many men who, in advanced years, much older than I am, have—married," he went on.

She was wholly puzzled, but kept her eyes on him inquiringly.

"They did right—quite right!" he cried. "We are all entitled to our happiness. That is the only true philosophy."

"YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND ME AND YOU HAVE NEVER UNDERSTOOD ME!"
p. 226.

"Since when have you taken up philosophy?" she asked with a slight smile.

"Well, what did you think? That I am interested only in the eternal grind of business?" He approached her accusingly. "That, alone, shows how little you know me! Have you expected me to move along unceasingly in the old groove year in year out? I tell you it has been that which has been driving me crazy!" He stooped to look into her eyes, almost malevolently. "Don't you understand how horrible it is? I sit as in a prison—looking through barred windows—and out there is life! In prison—having done no crime!"

She was only the more puzzled. "I don't understand——"

He shrugged helplessly and changed his line of argument. "Do you know, Anna, why our old friend, Henry Purcell, is living in New York? Away from his family?"

"I suppose it is for business reasons." She remained entirely unruffled.

"No. He has gone and he will not return."

She was astonished. "What?"

"It is quite true. He says that when married people feel that they cannot live happily together they should separate. Not in anger, but in all kindness and friendship, so that the injury may be repaired, so that each may seek his happiness, or hers, in the best way, without interference from the other. Now consider, Anna. Isn't that the right view of the matter?"

Her amazement struggled with her incredulity.

"But how *can* they separate—after twenty-five years together—and with grandchildren?"

His voice, in answering, was nervous and excited, as if, even in advance of her understanding of the situation, he wished to hurriedly assure her that he, himself, should do as well by his wife and his children. "They will be well provided for—both the children and the wife. And I, Anna—I——"

She interrupted him, but, even as she did so, turned back to her petty work. It was as if she wished to put such bizarre episodes out of her mind as soon as possible and felt that he, too, must detest consideration of them. "What is the world coming to?" she sighed, and then rose, as if to leave the room. "It seems that marriage does not mean as much nowadays as it did when we were young."

"That," said he, "is one of the subjects on which we don't agree, and another is this girl, Bettina, Anna. Anna—I—want you to know—that——"

Again she interrupted him, this time with firm, cool, decisive words. "It is useless to discuss that matter. It is settled. I bade her leave the house—for Harry's sake. Has she not gone?"

"You turned her away with neither friends nor money!"

"Don't worry about her. She is quite capable of taking care of herself. I gave her three months' wages."

With that she left the room.

He had accomplished very little. He gave up thought of doing, alone, what he wished to do with

her. He clearly saw that he must have outside assistance. Her unruffled calm, her way of failing utterly to see an inch beyond the routine of their lives' conventionality, rendered him helpless.

Thoughtfully he went into the hall where the telephone was fastened to the wall.

"Is that you, Alston?" he inquired when he had the connection which he asked for. "Well, wait for me. I'm coming down to see you."

"Barbie," he called after he had left the telephone, "if anyone asks for me here tell them that I've gone to Mr. Alston's office and shall be engaged there all the balance of the day. I may not be at home this evening, and very likely not to-night. Tell Mrs. Hoffman not to look for me at dinner."

Barbie gazed after him with troubled face. In his absorption he had spoken almost kindly to her, which, after the preceding months, was so unusual as to almost be a really bad sign. And the events which had accompanied the departure of Bettina had filled her with worry. From the kitchen window, to which, with a sense of triumph, she had flown to make sure that the girl was on her way out of the house, she had seen him standing by the auto while they waited for the man to go and get the robe. Her imagination did not soar so wildly as to dream of the tremendous cataclysm really impending, but a mysterious instinct made her worry.

"A storm is coming," she assured herself, and shivered. "I feel it in my bones."

"Alston," said Hoffman, as he went into the

lawyer's office, "I have something of importance to talk over with you."

"What? The Nelson case?"

"No; something of far more importance than the Nelson case."

"Whew! It must be big then! You've been pretty keen on that! Will it take long?"

"I think so."

"Then I'll tell them in the outside office that we're not to be disturbed." He rose and left the room. Returning, he sank into his big desk chair, whirling to Hoffman with a smile. "Fred, you're looking fine. Really splendid. Sort of rejuvenated lately."

"You think so?"

"Word of honor. Dressing better, too. Everybody getting on all right at home?"

"Of course."

"*That's* the main thing. Well what can I do for you?"

It was difficult to put the case, almost as difficult with Alston as he had thought it would be with Anna. But he knew that Alston could not utterly defeat him, as she had.

"Alston," he said at length, "after a great deal of thought, I have come to a very important conclusion."

The attorney smiled at him. "Ah, I see! You want to make your will. That's right, Fred."

Hoffman shook his head. "That's not it." He paused, considering, for a long minute, while Alston looked at him with good-natured curiosity. "You

know my past life, my character. You will, I am sure, judge me fairly."

Now Alston ceased his smiling. It was plain that heavy matters were impending. "Fred, you seem to have something on your conscience. What's troubling you? You know a lawyer is, so to speak, also a father confessor—and equally as discreet."

"The matter," said his client, "is of a very delicate nature."

Alston was surprised, but showed no advance disapproval. He knew men. "Ah, a little affair?"

"No—matrimony."

"Harry?"

"No."

"Beatrice?"

"No, Alston. Don't make it hard for me! I—I—want to marry."

The lawyer smiled. "Since when did you become a Mormon? This is a far-fetched joke. Give me the diagram."

That Hoffman was not joking his face showed. "I am in dead earnest."

Still Alston was not impressed. Either he had quite misunderstood, or it *must* be a joke—unless his friend were suddenly delirious. "Let me feel your pulse." He leaned forward, still more puzzled, but still smiling.

Hoffman almost angrily drew back the hand the lawyer would have taken in his jest. "I'm not in the mood for joking."

as evidence for later use; but all the time another portion of his mind was busy—tragically busy—with the situation which his old friend had laid before him. He could not believe it, yet he knew that Hoffman was neither drunk nor crazy; it was too horrid to be true, yet it was true. Fred, whom he loved, was firmly fixed upon this dreadful action; Anna, whom he loved and had loved for so many years that he could not remember when he had not loved her, was about to be subjected to a shock which might well kill her.

"Fred," he said, at length, turning back to face his visitor, "you are about to make a great mistake. A better woman than your wife you will never find. Would you really bring such sorrow upon her and on your children?"

Hoffman stirred uneasily in the great leather chair in which he rested, but made no reply.

"Think it over," Alston urged. "Can the prize be worth the sacrifice?"

Still Hoffmain remained silent.

"May I ask who is——"

"You know her," Hoffman answered. "Miss Curtis."

Alston started back, as if he had been struck. This was incredible! That this man, his old friend, should forsake Anna—*Anna!*—for that girl! It was too terrible. "A-h-h!"

He looked at Hoffman with a nodding head. The whole miserable truth flashed through his mind. He knew what had ensnared the man—the pretty, pas-

sionate face, with its full lips which promised luscious kisses, the graceful, softly rounded body, with its languorous arms, which promised rich embraces, the vitality of not high-minded youth, which promised full amusement, with no pause for thought.

"Fred, I've got to have a little time to think it over."

"But——"

"No; I'll come to your house this evening."

"But Anna will be——"

"No; she'll be at prayer-meeting—praying for you, Fred, probably!"

"Alston——"

"I won't say another word about it till I've had a chance to think it over."

The meeting at the house, that evening, was as between armed men, manœuvering for an advantage. It was not until they were seated at the library table, after Hoffman had made sure that no one could overhear the talk which was to come, that the subject which was seething in the mind of each of them was brought up.

"Well," said Hoffman, "what have you decided?"

Alston, with shaking head, sat a long moment looking earnestly at his old friend. He leaned forward with intense, impetuous earnestness. "Fred, for God's sake! This is a matter about which I feel keenly. My very deep affection for you—for your family——"

Hoffman interrupted him with a sharp protest. It was the first exhibition of his habitual brusque queru-

lousness he had given since he had come into the office. Shame was losing the strong upper hand which it had had with him, at first; he was becoming dominant again, aggressive: "I have considered everything. Nothing can change my determination."

"And you are so dazzled—or so selfish—that you would disgrace yourself—your wife—your children—before all the world?"

"I care nothing," said the man of iron—for he was, again, the man of iron, now: neither the man of putty which Bettina had made of him, nor the apologetic man which he had been that afternoon, when he had first come in—"for the opinion of the world."

"Oh, yes, you do!" cried Alston. "We all do. No matter how we boast of our indifference to public opinion, we squirm and twist when the ugly breath of scandal touches us! You must know, as well as I, what the world thinks of a man who repudiates the wife who has stood by him through his early struggles, who has become the mother of his children!"

Sullenly Hoffman shook his head.

"Fred, I don't know what I ought to say; but I have the clearest notion of what I feel."

"Your eloquence is wasted," his client declared earnestly. "My mind is quite made up." He glared at Alston with his fierce look of decision in the face of opposition. "My wife is a sensible woman. She will not deny me happiness. She will consent, I'm sure."

Alston threw his hands up in despair.

"For a long time," Hoffman went on, slowly, "we

"HUSBANDS NEVER WANT TO HEAR THE TRUTH." p. 237.

have lived together only as friends. We can remain friends."

"Man——"

"It is for the best, I tell you, it is fate."

"Fate! Fate!" cried Alston, with contempt. "I'll tell you what *I* think it is—it is the case of a fine principled man turned into a selfish brute by a——"

Hoffman rose with a black face. "Alston! That's enough!"

"Forgive me," said the lawyer, "if I speak strongly, for I must."

Hoffman made an angry gesture.

"I want no man's friendship," said the lawyer, and his voice rose, "at the expense of integrity and truth."

"Alston!" Hoffman really was frightened.

"Yes; the truth!" said Alston, loudly.

Again he went and stood by the window, but this time was utterly unconscious of what appeared before him. Hoffman, meantime, pale and furtive-eyed, but not at all dissuaded, sat waiting somewhat dully. Of course, if Alston would not take the case—why, there were other lawyers.

"I know," Alston began, again. "Husbands never want to hear the truth . . . neither from their wives nor from their lawyers. How absurd! How cruel! After God knows how many years of married life, they suddenly begin to wonder why their wives look dowdy. They begin to compare them with other women. Usually it is a comparison made wholly on the basis of good looks, which mostly mean youth and good clothes. The husband tires of seeing his

wife look like a frump, although he never made objection to her dressing in cheap hand-me-downs while he was piling up his fortune. The man, you see, has won his fight for money. He begins to wish for those things money buys—even for the women which it buys! She . . . the wife who has worked with him, and, very likely, has done as much as he has . . . often more . . . to make the money which is her undoing, now, no longer pleases his exacting eye. She does not stack up in his mad eyes with other women, younger, probably; if not younger, then women who have not been forced to labor, as she has had to labor, to assist struggling husbands. He begins to flirt with some doll-faced, empty-headed clothes-rack, whose brains are worth not one-hundredth part as much as those of his own wife . . . and next comes . . . what? Divorce!

"My God!" He spat contemptuously, as if the word were foul upon his tongue. "Well, Fred, I've had many cases like it . . . but I'll not take yours!"

"But, Alston——"

"I won't take it . . . because I'm fond of Anna . . . and the children . . . and . . . yourself."

Hoffman was too worried, now, to flare. He wished, above all things, to have Alston do this work for him. None other could so save his face; none save the children from so much of the inevitable horror, none could preserve Anna from so much of the unutterable misery which he knew the thing would cause her. He wished her to be saved from misery,

and found in this desire a little cause for pride. It seemed to him to be magnanimous.

"You have named the very reasons why I wish to put the case into your hands," he urged. "You shall be my attorney and theirs, too. I'll do all I can for her, and for the children. I promise you that everything shall be arranged as you suggest, in reason, if you will only help me."

Alston shook his head.

But Hoffman would not be denied. "Stand by me, Alston! Believe me . . . my heart is heavy enough; but I cannot do otherwise. Man, I want to live! I have never known actual life. Here with her . . . sober and unresponsive as she is . . . I should wither . . . I should prematurely die! For years I have but existed . . . miserably!

"You remember New Year's Eve? I had then made up my mind to close up my account with life, so far as any desire went. I was resigned. But, almost at once . . . she came into the house . . . into my life. Alston, it is Destiny!"

Alston looked at the entranced man with a hopeless grimace. What could he do with such a case? If he did not do as was requested, some other lawyer would, and would cause Anna untold suffering. It would be better, after all, for him to yield. Anna would know, perfectly, how bitterly he had protested. And, without his help—ah, what an ordeal for her and for the children!

"Oh, well," he said to Hoffman, "what's the use of reasoning?" He smiled strangely, pityingly. "You're

in love. That, in itself, is a sickness, and, considering the age of the patient, I am afraid the case is hopeless."

He then spoke tenderly.

"My dear old Fred! I wish I could feel that this step will bring you happiness."

Again he stood in silent, saddened contemplation of him, while Fred rose, relieved and smiling.

"Come in and see me in a day or two. Bring all the necessary data. Above everything, bring me your wife's consent, if you wish me to assist you. I'll see what can be done," Alston promised sadly.

Enormously relieved, Hoffman accompanied Alston to the door.

"Think it over once more, Fred," said Alston gravely. "It's an awful thing . . . and a damned stupid thing! I wish you would give the case to someone else . . . and still——"

"Alston, do me this service. I beg of you!"

"Well, for the sake of our friendship, for the sake of your family——"

"Thank you," Hoffman exclaimed earnestly. "I rely on you."

"And what's to be done in the Nelson case?"

"Oh, let the matter drop. I prefer to remain friends with him."

"I advise you to do likewise . . . with your wife!"

Frederick Hoffman slowly shook his head and Alston left the house.

CHAPTER X

From Alston's office Hoffman proceeded to the factory, where he amazed Valentine and Harry by announcing, without hinting at his destination, that he was to leave the city very soon for an indefinite period. Barbie went to the telephone when the message came that father and son would be away for dinner, owing to the rush of work which this necessitated, and found herself much puzzled by it. Such a thing had never happened in the past. When, at breakfast, it developed that only Harry had come home to sleep, she was more puzzled. Anna accepted, with a greater calm than the old servant's, the boy's troubled explanation that his father, wishing to rise very early, had stayed at the hotel.

"He didn't want to trouble Barbie to get up," said he.

"Huh!" Barbie commented. "Never happened in this house before!"

Harry, himself, found a new worry when he reached the factory—strictly, on time, that morning—and discovered that his father had not even gone to the hotel, but had been at his desk all night, whipping himself awake with boiling coffee, brought by one of the night-shift, from a small, cheap workman's restaurant nearby. He had been poring over old

accounts, docketing papers, studying plans, and making notes on correspondence, as if his absence would entail a change in the firm's management.

"Father!" he exclaimed. "You will be ill! You'll work yourself to death!"

"My son won't," Hoffman answered grimly.

Later in the day, when there came a lull quite unavoidable—it was early afternoon, and Hoffman had lunched at his desk, on sandwiches—he pushed back his chair and spoke more kindly to the boy.

"Harry," he said, slowly, "you're going to have a chance to prove exactly what is in you."

"What do you mean, father?" The boy was definitely frightened. All day he and Valentine had exchanged furtive, inquiring glances, when they dared.

"I have decided to give you every opportunity . . . a free hand, here. I'm going to turn the business over to you . . . to you and Valentine, under Mr. Alston's supervision . . . for a time. I'm going to take a rest."

As he spoke his eyes were sunken in deep, shadowed sockets, his face was white and pasty from his lack of sleep. His hand was steady and his words came smoothly, but his voice was hoarse. It was not harsh, however, as he went on with his explanation—the explanation which did not explain.

"I've built up a fine business here. It has made money. I have accomplished this by work and nothing but work. Night and day I've slaved to see that everything went forward. Day and night I've watched to see that everything went well. Your

mother and your sister and yourself have been the beneficiaries."

There seemed almost to be a note of accusation in this final statement—a claim that he had made tremendous sacrifices, while they, continually, had demanded more, more, more. Nothing could be farther from the fact, but it was specious reasoning, hard to combat, not hard to fall into.

"But hasn't it been fun?" the boy asked, scarcely knowing what to say.

"It has been a fever," said his father. "Effort unremitting, strain ever unrelieved . . . work, work, work, from opening time to closing time . . . and then, at home, the worry, and hard thinking, desperate scheming, which made rest, often, quite impossible. All this I've done . . . done for my wife——"

"For mother," Harry said, involuntarily.

"Done for my wife, my daughter, and my son. I have been unremitting; I have been unselfish" (he really thought he had); "I have shown mercy to all except myself."

"You've worked too hard; I've often said so. In these days——"

"You will have to work as hard," said Hoffman, raspingly. "From all this work I have received, as my portion of the proceeds, my food, a place to sleep, my clothes and a few friends."

"But, father! There have been other things! Mother—and us children!"

"Anna has kept my house, and kept it well."

The boy chilled horribly at this and at the way his father said it. Indeed it so alarmed him that he could not make a protest. To hear his father speaking of his mother as if she had done nothing more than keep his house!

"You and Beatrice have meant a great deal to me. I loved you when you both were little babies. I have always loved you. I have tried to prove it."

Now the boy was touched, but he remained as speechless as he had in face of the indirect indictment of his mother.

There was a dread solemnity about this episode which awed him. He could not remember ever having heard his father express love for him; he had often been affectionate with Beatrice, but not with him. Now, suddenly, he saw that many things had evidenced a deep affection.

"You *have* proved it, dad." He choked a little as he spoke.

"I'm glad you think so . . . About things which recently have happened . . . and . . . of things which are to happen . . . you will know more, will understand more . . . later."

A sense of dread descended on the boy. "Which are to happen!" What could that mean?

"Father . . . tell me?" he implored.

There was a silent pause of seconds. During it the man's unwonted softness vanished.

"Attend to that new order of the Brigman Company with more care than you gave the Mathews order," he said gruffly—and the conversation ended.

When Harry had gone from the room, Hoffman pulled the telephone across his desk and called for Alston's office.

"Have you . . . seen Anna, yet?" he asked.

"I'm going now," said Alston. "Fred——"

"Let me know when you get back."

The interruption was abrupt, brusque and intolerant. He hung up the receiver, and, within a minute, was again buried in the detail of his work,—the transfer of his interests to his wife, with Harry acting as the general manager under Alston's supervision, the winding up of his own direct connection with the firm. Alston would be able to consult with him and so things would go well, but beyond that he wished to leave no link to bind him to the past.

Alston walked to the red brick house among the evergreens. His car was waiting at his office door, but he had no wish to hasten on his tragic errand. Indeed, even his footsteps lagged. His eyes saw nothing of the streets through which he passed, his heart throbbed as it had, he suddenly remembered, when he had been a schoolboy and had been upon the way to take an ordered thrashing.

"Mr. Alston, where is Fred?" said Anna, when she came into the library to greet him.

"At the factory," he answered. "I have just left him."

"Why does he not come home?"

He hesitated. "It is concerning that that I have

come to see you, Anna." In late years he had rarely used her first name.

This, and his manner, frightened her. "Tell me . . . what is happening? Mr. Alston, what is happening?" she asked.

Her placidity had not entirely gone; a lifelong habit of smooth unexcitement will not fall into hysteria in a day, or in a week, but he could see that a furnace in tremendous turmoil seethed underneath the surface calm.

"It is what I have come here to tell you," he said sadly, "and, Anna, please believe me when I say to you that never in my life has any duty seemed so tragic."

"Tell me," she repeated, still repressed, but working at a fold of her dress-skirt with nervous fingers.

"It almost seems to me as if I could not do it," he replied, "and yet it must be done. Fred, Anna . . . oh, Fred is not . . . he is a *sick* man——"

"Sick?" His word startled her.

"I do not mean in body, but in mind."

"You do not mean that Fred is . . . breaking——" Her eyes were full of a new fright.

"No; I still fail to give my meaning. He is not sick in body or in mind, but . . . sick in his soul!"

She leaned forward, white, puzzled, speechless.

"It is a sickness, Anna, please believe me; it is a sickness. I think that as time passes he will find a cure. If I did not look on it as sickness, if I did not think he would be cured of it, I need not assure you, Anna, that I would stand before him and denounce

him in such words as I have never used to any man!"

Her terror palpably increased.

"You must understand that I have come here with reluctance such as I have never known before; that I have come here, dulled by horror such as I have never felt before; that I have come here on an errand which I would perform for no one but your husband, and that in the world there is no house which I would enter on an errand of this sort less willingly."

"Mr. Alston," she said weakly, "exactly what have you to say to me?"

"Anna, Fred believes that he has been unhappy. The mad obsession fills his mind that here in Belleville he cannot find happiness; and——"

"He wants to move away from Belleville?" She was surprised, but not dismayed.

"Yes; he wants to move away from Belleville . . . and he wants to go . . . alone."

"Without taking . . . me? Of course, Harry could not go . . . Oh, *what* do you mean?"

"I have not the heart to tell you what I mean, Anna; my tongue fails me; literally my brain reels at the task. But, in advance, I must assure you that I have talked with Fred as frankly as any man could talk with any man, that I have used my last powers of persuasion, that I have given up the task . . . defeated."

She was breathless as she listened.

"Anna, Fred has asked me to come here to see you and discuss . . . divorce."

"Divorce?" Even now she did not sense this unbelievable, this undreamed-of situation. "Divorce!"

He bowed.

"From . . . me?"

Again he bowed.

"But . . . *why?*"

Slowly, as tenderly as possible, he gave her the reason.

"You mean that he . . . Fred . . . loves . . . her! Bettina? That . . . unfortunate . . . and silly . . . girl?"

"To think he does is now a detail of his madness."

"It is impossible."

"It *is* impossible . . . but it is true."

"And he asks me, the mother of his children, his companion for more than a quarter of a century, his . . . *wife* . . . to aid him and abet him in such wicked folly? No, Mr. Alston, no!"

"It is all true, unhappily."

"And does he think I would so wrong my children, so demean myself, harm him so terribly as to accede to this insane request?"

Alston looked compassionately into her suffering eyes, wide with their mingled incredulity and wild revolt.

"Anna, it would be the simplest way, the best way. You know Fred. You know he stops at nothing when attempt is made to cross him. I—I tremble when I think of what he might do, if we did not yield to him. I am sure he would not hesitate at open scandal . . . and we must think about——"

"The children," she gasped, weakly.

"Yes; we must think about the children; and we must think about yourself. I have tried . . . but, I have told you, and, if I had not told you, you would know that I had tried. I have tried and I have failed."

She had sunk back in her chair, to stare dully into space with eyes which seemed to have acquired a sort of glaze of horror. "Divorce!" she murmured thickly. "Fred . . . and I . . . divorced! *Fred!* Fred and . . . *I* . . . oh . . . *God!*"

"It is a nightmare," he admitted.

For a long time she said nothing, did not move a muscle, and he made no effort to recall himself to her attention. She was evidently trying desperately to djust herself to this incredible development.

"Mr. Alston," she said dully, after a full quarter of an hour had passed, "you must give me time to think about this."

"Of course, Anna."

"Time to think about this."

"When shall I come again?"

"Time to think about this." The repetitions were mechanical. "Then I shall send for you."

Like a woman walking in her sleep she rose, and, without giving him another glance, glided from the room.

It was as if a ghost walked. Her tall form was rigid and her head up, while her eyes stared straight ahead; her feet found the way by instinct; there was scarcely any movement of her shoulders; she seemed to progress without footsteps slowly from the room.

When Alston went into the hall he stepped with

cautious softness, as instinctive as precautions against noise are in a house of death. He walked with head bowed, reverently, as one walks in a sanctuary. He saw Barbie, dusting far back in the hall, and beckoned to her, but, quickly, held a warning finger to his lips, as, approaching, she would have spoken to him.

His manner terribly alarmed her. "Mr. Alston!" she gasped weakly. "Mr. Alston! Is anybody . . . dead?"

"No; Barbie. But I want to speak to you a moment." His voice was a husky whisper.

"Yes, Mr. Alston . . . oh——"

"Careful! Step into the library."

He took her arm and drew her with him into the dim room.

"You must be very gentle with your mistress, very thoughtful, very kind. She has been overtaken by a great trouble—by a trouble worse, to her, far worse, than death could be."

"Oh . . . oh . . ."

"Careful! Remember . . . we must think of her and of her only. No one else is of importance, for a time."

He told her, very simply, what the shadow was which hung above that house, and stilled her outcry when she learned its basic fact by a hand literally held upon her lips. When she would have railed at Hoffman he quieted her by speaking of him, as, indeed he thought of him, as one who had gone mad and merited the sad consideration which we give to

those thus smitten by the gods. When she began to softly sob he gently placed his hand upon her shoulder, with:

"Dear Barbie—no; you must not even weep! Remember! We must think of her, alone."

"Can't a body even cry?"

"No; it would but add to her distress."

She snuffled bravely, and, with a tremendous effort, choked the sobs down from her throat. "All . . . right, Mr. Alston."

"That's a good Barbie. And . . . be good to her!"

"Mr. Alston, I'd cut off my legs to please her."

He smiled. "It wouldn't please her, Barbie. Keep your legs, and . . . keep your wits. Be good to her."

With Harry, with whom he took a walk, in near spring woods, after office hours that evening, he had the hardest time of all, although the mental strain of telling him was less, of course, than the interview with Anna had demanded.

His difficulties with the youth were different. The boy's emotions ran a frightful gamut. The crisis was made doubly terrible, to him, because of his own feeling toward Bettina. He had believed himself to be deeply, truly, and unalterably in love with her. He had set her on that pedestal which, in the mind of each clean-spirited youth, stands waiting to uphold the figure of his ideal of womanhood. It was the first of his illusions to be shattered, and the crash racked him terribly. When to it was added the in-

credible horror of the revelation of his father's plans, his desertion of his mother, his departure from their lives, the mental burden became almost more than the poor youth could bear.

At first, in his fierce indignation, he wished to seek his father out, denounce him, rend him, crush him. "If he's done that to mother—to my mother!" he cried violently, "I'm going to punish him! I don't care . . . that he's my father won't protect him. Mr. Alston, I am going to kill him!"

"No, you're not, dear boy. What you're going to do is buckle down and make your mother proud of you. You're all she has, now, mind you! You and Beatrice, at any rate. You wouldn't make her troubles any heavier than they are now, would you?"

"God knows I wouldn't!" said the boy, standing in the dim grove, staring moodily at a log, half-sunken in the ground and velvety with spring's soft plush of tender green.

"Then brace up, boy . . . and be a man! Remember that your life has changed as wholly as if you had been thrust into a brand-new world. Why, Harry, you're the man of the house, from now on! You must bear the new responsibilities with tact, with dignity, with industry, with sense."

"I'll try to; but——"

"The 'buts' in life . . . don't waste your thought on them. Come home, now; your mother needs you near her—needs you very sorely, Harry."

"She'll always find me there!"

"Fine! Come along!"

The undefended suit against Frederick Hoffman shook Belleville to its deep foundations. Not during the decade had scandal struck so high in the old, conservative community. But so carefully did Alston handle it, with such adroitness did he keep all details from the records, with such skill did he seize each advantage of the statute, that when the suit was ended and the decree entered, little, really, had been told to satisfy the public curiosity. Anna Hoffman had sued Frederick Hoffman for divorce—and won her suit.

That was all the world knew of it, and those who chanced to catch a glimpse of Anna—and they were not many, she kept in a seclusion as complete as possible—gained little satisfaction for their morbid curiosity from a study of her pale, immobile face. Beatrice was not brought home from school, but as soon as it was ended, Alston made the journey to the convent to break the news to her. Harry took his tasks up bravely—and the world wagged almost as before.

On the afternoon when she was handed the decree, Anna sat alone in her own room, which had been darkened into yellow dusk by the close drawing of the shades. She held the folded paper in her fingers, but did not open it, or even glance at it. Harry rapped upon her door and called to her, but she asked him to go downstairs and see her in the morning. Barbie went up with a tray of dainty food, her old face drawn with agony, her hands tremulous, her footsteps tottering; and Anna did not

grieve her by refusing it, but asked her to just put it down and leave it; she would taste it, perhaps, later.

When Barbie entered two hours later it remained untasted, and she could see that Anna scarcely knew that she was there. Mindful of Alston's warning she choked back her sobs and took the tray out softly.

She spent the night before her mistress' door, sometimes walking up and down upon soft slippers, cat-like, wringing her old hands in a dumb grief, sometimes seated with disconsolate, drooping shoulders, in a stiff chair which she had softly carried to a place near the door. It was just at dawn when she heard Anna stirring and was instantly alert for she knew not what catastrophe. She dared not enter, but she listened at the door.

"Lord, God of Hosts," she heard. "Ah . . . why hast Thou Forsaken me? Ah—why? . . . Ah—why?"

There was a silence long and hard for Barbie to endure, and then again the cry:

"Lord, God of Hosts, ah, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

Barbie started, frightened, as she heard a soft step near her. Looking apprehensively across her shoulder she saw Harry wrapped in a dressing-gown and in his slippers, looking pale and haggard.

"What is it, Barbie?" the boy whispered. "Is—is anything the matter?"

"Oh, the poor, poor soul!" moaned Barbie. "The

poor soul! Listen, Mr. Harry . . . she is praying?"

She put her hand upon his arm and in the gray, chill morning they stood apprehensively, eavesdroppers because they loved the sufferer within.

"Hearken unto the voice of my cry, my King and my God: for unto thee will I pray! For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee."

"She's reciting from the Psalms," said Barbie brokenly. "God give her comfort!"

"Thou hatest all workers of iniquity," they heard in the strange, wailing voice of her within, and a little later, in an agony of pleading: "Because of mine enemies make my way straight before me!"

"I must go in to her," said Harry.

"Better not! No; better not," said Barbie. "Let her fight it out in her own way. We have to, all of us. She's getting help from someone stronger. Listen!"

"Arise, O my Lord; save me, O my God. . . . Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness. . . . Have mercy upon me and hear my prayer!" they heard the weary, heartsick woman wail, her voice a groan of agony. "Have mercy upon me, O Lord; consider my troubles. . . . How long wilt Thou forget me, O Lord? Forever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from Me? . . . My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me? O my God, I cry to thee in the

daytime and thou hearest me not: and in the night season thou art silent."

"All Psalms," said Barbie. "Every word is from the Psalms."

For half an hour they crouched there, listening to this crying of a soul in torment, unwilling to depart from the cry's tragic radius, unwilling to invade the sanctuary of the sufferer's grief. At length the voice was weaker.

"She's tiring out—poor soul!" Barbie whispered to him. "Maybe she will go to sleep."

"Hush!" said Harry.

"O Lord, my strength and my redeemer! . . . O Lord, my strength and my redeemer!" the voice within monotonously repeated many times.

After that there was a long, cold silence which frightened Harry dreadfully. He would have hurried in to break it had not Barbie held him back with: "Mr. Harry, maybe she is getting now the answer to her prayers." And presently they heard the weary woman's voice intoning:

"The Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord's throne is in Heaven, his eyes behold . . . the heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament sheweth his handiwork."

"Hear? What did I tell you?" Barbie whispered. "The peace of God is coming to her."

Ten minutes later in a different voice not triumphant, but no longer tragic; not without its solemn sorrow, but not that of a soul in torment as the voice had been before, they heard Anna say:

"Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am in trouble: mine eye is consumed with grief; I am forgotten . . . I am like a broken vessel."

"Poor soul!" murmured Barbie. "Oh, poor soul!"

Then, twenty minutes later, drowsily: "The Lord is my rock and my fortress . . . my deliverer; my God and my strength in which I will trust; He . . . is . . . my buckler. . . . For thou *art* my rock . . . and my fortress; therefore . . . for thy name's sake, lead me . . . guide me. . . ."

"He's helping her!" said Barbie reverently.

"Into thy hands . . . I commit my spirit, O Lord God . . . of truth," they heard at last —and then no more.

When, after a long period of silence, Barbie softly entered, Anna was asleep.

"Go to bed now, Harry," she said softly, as she came out of the room. "I've covered her all up. She won't take cold. I'll wait and watch. You go to bed and get a little rest. You've got your day's work now to do each day, you know."

CHAPTER XI

Alston was called away from Belleville shortly after the conclusion of the divorce, rather to his relief, for the strain on him of that one case had been far greater than the strain of any dozen he had ever tried before.

For Anna's sake he had done what he could to keep the procedure secret, but had found this impossible, and, therefore, to her agony of mind over the destruction of her happiness was added her incredible distress at sight of her name—hers, Anna Hoffman's!—blazoned largely in the public prints in connection with a scandal. The press in these United States is merciless, and it did not fail to take advantage of this alienation of an elderly and rich man's fancy by a young and pretty wanderer.

In Belleville itself, where through her good works, Anna had become generally loved, where the newspapers were comparatively small and slack in "enterprise," and where, especially, Alston's influence was very great, not so very much was printed; but the Buffalo dailies sent their special correspondents on the first day of the trial, and upon the second day two men and a woman reached Belleville from New York, assigned by their editors to get all the "human interest" they could from the unfortunate

affairs of this "up-state millionaire," his old-fashioned wife and the *chic* and clever, if unscrupulous, New York girl, who had gone there as a companion and gone away a favorite of fortune.

At this point in the affair Alston's indignation ran so high that he wrote bitterly to Murfree, reproaching him for having told him good things of a girl who had been capable of such performances. It was long after the divorce suit ended before he had an answer, and then Murfree discoursed cynically, denying that he had, as Alston had implied, misrepresented the girl's character. He insisted that she was a "good" girl in the one sense of the word which is accepted in such matters, but that the fact that she was emphatically unconventional had been plainly indicated by the picture of her which he had presented to the lawyer.

This utterly astounded Alston. Picture of her! Murfree had given him one picture only and that had been the one which, at the first glance, had so made him shrink that he had thrust it deep into a drawer and never looked at it again. Now, with reluctant fingers, he drew it from its hiding place.

To the sophisticated, his procedure, after he had done this, might have seemed amusing. He scarcely glanced at the extremely pretty thing until the lower four-fifths of the panel had been hidden with a handkerchief, and even after this was done, he held his head, as he glanced downward, almost as timorously as if he had been really afraid the little picture might spring at him and bite him.

But when, after the concealment of the figure which offended him, he took a long look at the face, he gasped. It was Bettina's!

Ah, why had he not looked at it before? Ah, why had he not looked at it in time? Had Fred known this surely he never would have——

For one moment he considered the advisability of mailing the extremely pretty, but to him, extremely shocking thing, to Hoffman, so that he might quite appreciate the treasure for whose sake he had made the sacrifice of wife and children, home and reputation; but this impulse passed.

He still loved Fred, loved him, though he felt that he had sinned beyond most men. If, sometimes, when he sat in reverie in his lonely hotel room, he tried to find excuses for his erring friend, his search was due to what he knew of the man's youth of unremitting grind, imposed upon him by a father who considered work the only honor, money the only gain, followed by the sort of early manhood logical to this—a period of terrific effort from which everything not laborious was barred by the necessities of the increasing business which had become his heritage upon his father's death. And then he thought of Hoffman's mother—a gay creature, at the start, gradually stunned into a disappointed maturity of solemn domesticity, unnatural to her, but unescapable. Was not the son, with his two eccentricities of years of unremitting toil, followed by this one, tremendous escapade, the logical outcome of this ancestry?

Occasionally he heard from him in queer, strained correspondence which, endeavoring to be light and airy, instead was little less than tragic to the shrewd eyes of the lawyer. The letters said the man had found fine happiness in his transplanting; that while the rest from business had come late in life, it still was most agreeable; that his young wife had shown him many details of the lightsome side of life which he had scarcely known existed.

These matters were passed over briefly, and, Alston was convinced, referred to with reluctance. The balance of the correspondence always dealt with business, making inquiries as to how things were progressing in the Belleville factory, offering suggestions, always of the utmost value to Harry, Valentine and himself, and closing ever with a brief request to Alston to assure his son when he should see him, and his daughter, when he wrote to her, that their father loved them, missed them, wished them very well. The letters never mentioned Anna.

At first the lawyer answered these communications tersely, going into necessary details of the business, praising Harry when he could, urging the advance of Valentine, telling briefly about Beatrice, her needs and progress, and adding some slight gossip of the town, to make his writing seem less formal than, for a time, he felt impelled to make it. Later, when he thought he read between the lines of Hoffman's letters real anxiety, when, now and then, a word or two which he was sure had crept in unawares, seemed to suggest dissatisfaction with things as they were

and homesickness for the old era, he was more merciful, and went into details, even enclosing the chatty letters Beatrice often wrote to him. Once he remembered and dictated to a stenographer a long extract from a letter she had written to her mother and which Anna had permitted him to see, telling of her triumphs in her school.

Both son and daughter wrote to their father now and then; they wished to, and even if they had not, Anna would have asked it of them, but Alston shrewdly guessed their letters to be constrained and labored—how could they fail to be?—and was certain Beatrice had said but little in them of her notable scholastic victories.

Thus he kept up a fairly brisk correspondence with the exile; he had by no means lost his love for him; he helped to train his son into a clever and devoted business man; once, during the first long vacation after the divorce, he tried to make the muddled matter clear to Beatrice.

But he never went to see Fred when he went to New York City, never even notified him of his presence there. He felt that he could not endure to see Bettina, feared that should he see her he might say something offensive, dreaded lest in case he called upon his friend he might uncork the vials of his wrath and again pour out upon his head a flood of indignation. That would be foolish. The worst which possibly could happen had happened. Silence was the best course now.

Anna was the greatest sufferer, of course, although

after that one dreadful night not even Barbie heard any plaint from her. But for many months her bodily strength so suffered that she could not go about, and when that had been remedied she found her mental strength insufficient to permit meetings with old friends. She felt that she could not be seen in the society of the little city without an effort so tremendous that it would bend her to the breaking point and time did not remove this strong reluctance. She became almost a recluse.

Of course all gossip of the case was hushed when she was near, and in these days even little cities are sufficiently accustomed to sensations to grow quickly tired of stale ones; but even at a year's end she found herself incapable of resuming her old activities in church and charity. It began to seem advisable for her to move away from Belleville, and Alston started on a search for a new home for her, finding one at length at Stillfield, within trolley distance of the factory, but far enough away to offer Anna a new circle of neighbors, a new church. It was with real difficulty that she kept herself from buying mourning clothes before she went to look at it.

She felt, indeed, that Fred had died. She told herself ten thousand times that the *real* Fred *had* died. She was saved the horror which would have tortured many woman, had they been placed as she was, of trying to imagine him set in his new environment—the continual companion of the girl she had dismissed, making new friends, learning new ele-

gancies—for her imagination halted, baffled, at the effort to create such pictures. She could only think of him as she had known him, and as the months passed she only thought of him as she had known him in those years before irascibility had grown into a habit with him, when he had sometimes been the lover—as he had been, indeed, when the children had been little.

Thus Anna Hoffman seemed truly to be widowed—seemed, to her own mind, to have been bereaved by death. And the little city tried to be considerate. She was treated as a widow should be by her friends; but she was glad to get away from it.

The first year changed her greatly in appearance, whitening her hair, giving her face the age-transparence which should not make marked it for another ten or fifteen years, making her a little feeble; but this did not increase. Indeed, the second year brought some recovery of strength, and after this slight gain, she reached a period of calm—the calm of resignation sweetened by the wish to make her children happy and assist all those who came to her for help.

Frederick Hoffman and Bettina had taken up their residence in New York City, where they had been married very quietly by a magistrate, and great was the rejoicing thereat in the Amsterdam Avenue flat. William, the bride's brother, declared vulgarly that the family at last had found an "angel" and that he hoped Bettina would not be a "tight-wad." She was not. Penuriousness formed no part of her deal-

ing with her family—or with herself. "For rent" signs soon appeared in the flat windows and were taken down from windows in a more expensive domicile which overlooked the Park, the little sister was sent straightway to a "College of Dramatic Art;" Bettina paid her brother's gambling debts and started him upon a fresh career of gaming, dressed in new and very gorgeous clothing! Mamma Curtis was arrayed as never were the lilies of the field, and ceased the little toiling which had previously been forced upon her.

Nor were blood relations the only beneficiaries of Bettina's advantageous marriage. Her stepfather was packed off to a sanitarium where he was urged to give up alcohol, but permitted to absorb enough to keep the habit fastened on him—for Frederick Hoffman's wife paid his bills promptly, although she shrewdly made it understood that they must not be large. Generous as Hoffman was, she found it easily possible to outstrip his generosity with her expenditures on clothes and other of the new extravagancies which she quickly learned to crave. Of her beneficiaries, last but by no means least, Mr. Theodore Sevigny, engaged to instruct Bettina in the higher branches of the musical art, not only found much profit through this, which enabled him to bloom forth in highly-tailored raiment and to change his address, but was supplied with plausible excuses for frequent visits to the Hoffman ménage.

That these visits were, for the most part, at hours when Frederick was not at home, was, Bettina care-

fully explained to her husband, the fine result of her unselfishness. She was sure the noise of music-lessons would annoy him. When he expressed some doubts of this, she bade him test one of these periods of efforts and he did so.

He never afterward expressed the slightest wish to make a third member of the party when Bettina and her music master were engaged on her harmonic education. She had hinted carefully to Theodore, and with him had risen to the occasion. The young maestro's frenzied criticism of her, his wild protests when he claimed she had sung flat, played sharp or erred otherwise, drove Hoffman to the verge of madness, impelled him from the flat at a high speed, convinced him that Sevigny only little less than loathed Bettina and was animated by none but mercenary motives when he tendered her his services. He was partly right. Sevigny certainly was mercenary, but other impulses stirred in him when his eyes rested on Bettina.

It is said that New York City, of all places in the world, is the hardest to make friends in. It is the easiest in which to make acquaintances. If they have cleverness, newcomers may select, according to their varying tastes, approximately that set with which they wish to foregather, provided always that they are in funds. If they cannot enter the real set to which their aspirations point, they can quickly find an imitation of it shrewd enough to baffle all but expert eyes, and Hoffman's eyes were not expert.

His wife quickly built a life for them which dined

them in the most expensive restaurants, and there found acquaintances to bow to (and buy dinners for), which gave them guests for their elaborate house affairs and got them invitations to affairs of other people in like case and quite as gaudy, which made the keeping of two motors a necessity, which furnished well-dressed men and women in profusion for card-parties, at which the wines and the cigars and cigarettes were fine and plentiful, and at which, upon occasion, the host and hostess gracefully lost money.

It was an enormous change for Hoffman, and at first he liked it, for it was a whirl. A whirl, a very rapid whirl, was necessary for his own distraction from consideration of the past, far and immediate.

But he soon discovered this mad pursuit of pleasure to be by no means a light thing; that the obligations of the "idle rich" (especially their obligation to their young and handsome wives) may become as onerous as any work the human mind has ever planned for human energy to do; that pleasure may become an effort, gaiety a task. The hardest task of all, he found, is idleness.

He had been six months Bettina's husband before he learned to lie abed of mornings, whether or not the night before had been extended into the small hours; he had been her husband close upon a year before he was quite reconciled to the vast wardrobe she required of him; and calmness 'neath the touch of manicures, habituation to the semi-daily shave, subjection to a valet were great trials.

But her bright eyes shone for him, her chattering tongue flattered him, her young arms held him close when he had been unusually generous of funds or satisfying actions, the whole thing was novel, so he urged and half-convinced himself that, finally, he was enjoying life.

Nevertheless it was with a thrill of almost boyish joy that he heard Alston's voice one morning. His old friend and lawyer was inquiring for him in the thin hall which strung along the side of the high-priced apartment. Up to that moment he had been extremely sleepy; the night before had marked a new notch in Bettina's social progress, and the gaieties had continued until very late. And after the departure of the guests it had required much petting by Bettina to put him in good humor, for at one point in the evening, it had occurred to him that the function had been cleverly designed to thrust the merits of an opera composed by Theodore Sevigny into the attention of those influential in such matters, and he did not like Sevigny.

Almost as soon as he had married, this man had appeared on his horizon; he had been coming nearer ever since. His hair offended him and his manner racked his nerves; but he had been glad enough to have Bettina study music with him—she had assured him that Sevigny was a notable *maestro* and he had no means of knowing otherwise—for it seemed to entertain her, and very early in their matrimonial career he had learned that she required much entertainment.

But Sevigny later had grown to be among the chiefest of his worries, of which the others were all members of his young wife's family—three of them —each at times more worrisome than all the rest, and all at times most worrisome. He had almost rebelled when it had been decided that Mamma Curtis was to live with them, but Bettina's wrath had cowed him.

In the past he had had slight experience with women's wrath. During his life with Anna wrath had been his own monopoly. He had flared at everyone from time to time; no one had ever flared at him. Now it was far otherwise. Very early in his second married life he had learned the foolishness of flaring at Bettina. She did not take it nicely. The pathos of the poor, helpless girl, whom he had so forcefully defended against Anna, had wholly disappeared. He had tried, one day, to understand this, and suddenly, in response to his slow search for an explanation, he had found the true one. She was no longer poor and helpless! But it surprised him somewhat, and very much distressed him to observe that he, the very person who had rescued her from those conditions, was the very person who most suffered through her metamorphosis.

Yes; it would be a definite delight to see old 'Alston; yet he half-dreaded meeting him, for he had a tendency to feel uncomfortable when he encountered anyone who knew of his old life in Belleville and the woman he had left behind there; but it had been 'Alston who had put the divorce through—under

pressure, it is true, but still he had put it through—and so he could not think of him as entirely a critic.

He hurried in his dressing, mumbling fierce words as he did so, for his room was cluttered with unusual furniture. The greater number of the smaller pieces which would have obstructed the previous night's crush in the drawing-room, had been thrust into his chamber. In consequence, it was with difficulty that he found his clothes.

He managed, with a patent safety-razor, to accomplish a quick shave, but he could not get in range of his small shaving mirror without climbing over a *fauteuil* and several gilt chairs, so he grasped his bottle of Florida water in one hand and his little vial of brilliantine in the other, deciding to go out to Alston as he was. He could use them before one of the mirrors in the ornate room beyond after he had greeted his old friend.

He was really surprised to find with what a thrill of joy the mere sound of the lawyer's voice had filled him. Dear old Alston! He had missed him, perhaps more than any other of the details of his Belleville life except the children, and there had been many others which left astonishingly painful voids in his heart.

"Why, Alston! I'll be right with you," he called through the door, after he had heard the maid explain to him that Mr. Hoffman could see no one, being still asleep; had heard Alston's mild expression of surprise that this should be the case at eleven a. m., and had heard the maid explain, ill-naturedly, that

merriment had reigned the night before until after three. Confound that maid! He'd like to send her packing—but Bettina—well, he had learned better than to interfere in such affairs!

"Don't hurry on my account," said Alston. "I've got loads of time."

In the meantime Alston was left quite alone. A sharp voice which he recognized as Bettina's called the maid into another room. He could not fail to hear the colloquy ensuing, and it enlightened him. He had expected such enlightenment, soon or late.

"Why don't you answer when I ring?" the voice said ill-naturedly.

"I was busy, Madame," was the maid's reply, and it was uttered without much respect, he thought.

"Get my bath ready, and I'll wear my pink negligée. . . . Stupid!"

"Very well, Madame."

"Idiot!"

Alston smiled unhappily and looked about the room.

"You'll find cigars on my desk, Alston," Hoffman called to him. But when he looked into the desk nothing but an empty box was there.

He looked about him with a good deal of curiosity. It was eleven in the morning, yet the room had not been straightened after the night's festivities. A champagne cooler stood under the piano with an empty bottle in it; in one of the chairs a dainty, much be-ruffled woman's under petticoat had been cast carelessly.

"Guess I won't smoke," he thought somewhat ruefully, for he had forgotten to refill his case that morning. "They must have had a busy night here! Fred evidently is enjoying life as he could not in Belleville!" He did not think of this as very much to Fred's advantage—from the looks of things, or from the tones of the new Mrs. Hoffman's voice. He was wondering if this sort of thing could be agreeable to his friend when his reflections were cut short by the entrance of that friend himself.

He wore a house-coat of embroidered plush, his trousers were immaculately creased; in his left hand he bore two vials, one small, one larger, and it was from them that the odor which reminded Alston of a high-class barber-shop emanated.

"How are you? I'm so glad to see you!" cried Hoffman cordially. "So you've come to see me at last! That's very nice of you."

Alston smiled at him and watched him as he placed the bottles on a little table, beginning instantly to use their contents. The odor of the high-class barber-shop became intense.

"You don't mind my finishing here?" said Hoffman.

"Not at all, but I could just as well have gone into your room with you."

"No; we couldn't do it. It's in an awful state." He explained that it had been in use as coat-room, and was crowded with shelves and hat-racks.

"*Your* room!" Alston was astonished. In the old days it had never been the master of the house who

suffered inconveniences of that sort. But he tried not to seem surprised. "Oh," he responded carelessly, "I see."

For five minutes then they talked somewhat constrainedly. Neither was particularly comfortable; each was very glad to see the other; but it was difficult to find a common ground for conversation which would certainly be safe. Finally:

"Well, Alston, what brings you here?"

"Oh, business partly," said the lawyer, "but most of all an irresistible desire to see you again, old man; to hear from your own lips that you're enjoying your newly-found happiness."

Hoffman was not quite at ease. "That's very nice of you."

"Judging from appearances," said Alston gaily with a glance about the room, "you're having the time of your life." Then he looked at him as he stood before a mirror, working with his bottles. "And there's an atmosphere of youth about you that is positively refreshing." With an effort not to show his tolerant amusement he ran his eyes down over his friend's figure and its highly elegant habiliments. "And such a swell! One would hardly recognize you."

"Thank you," said Hoffman laughing and a little flattered. "You know, Alston, a man gets rusty up there in the country."

Alston nodded without much conviction; the thought was flitting through his mind that a bit of what Fred evidently now thought "rust" would be

more fitting to a man of Hoffman's age and training than the very glittering polish which he seemed to have acquired. It was a sort of nickel-plated Hoffman he had found. He liked him less than the old Hoffman, even though the old one had been far less shiny. Why, Fred had even picked up something of the New York accent! He softened down his "r's" and drawled his "a's" a little.

"But in this gay city," the subject of his thoughts went on, "and at the side of my young and charming wife——"

"So you are really happy?"

"Of course I am."

"Well, that's the main thing."

Hoffman wished to ask about affairs in Belleville, but was hesitant. Alston felt quite sure of this. He did not get his courage to the point until the tying of his cravat gave him an excuse to look away from Alston while he made his inquiries.

"Now tell me, Alston, what's the news at home?" he asked when his face was fully turned away.

"Excellent," said Alston. "Harry and Valentine have buckled to in earnest since you have been away; but of course you know that. The reports have shown you——"

"Yes; they're doing well."

"I should think you'd miss the business sometimes, Fred. You used to be so wrapped up in it—so full of your work. I should think that this inactive life——"

"If you think I'm any the less active now than I

was there, you are mistaken," Hoffman answered gaily. "I have a whole lot to do——"

"With no business to attend to? For heaven's sake—what?"

Hoffman went to a small writing desk, taking from it an engagement book. "Here! Listen to this week's program. And my wife, mind you, carries it out strictly. To-morrow, for example, we go to the automobile races on Long Island. Then we dine—out, for a wonder! I've been giving many dinners—they're such fun, you know! In the evening we have a theater party, and after that a supper at Sherry's. The next day we lunch with Hemlich—she's the new contralto at the opera, you know—and in the afternoon we go to a reception at Count Deveaux's studio. Then, of course, there comes the Horse Show in the evening." He closed the little book. "That's the way it goes. Formerly, you see, work was my pleasure; now pleasure is my work."

"Hard work sometimes, too, I reckon." Alston smiled quizzically. "Well, youth must have its fling."

Fred was really pleased. So constantly had Bettina harped on the necessity that he keep himself in juvenile condition that he found this reference of Alston's comforting. He was dimly conscious that by this very pleasure he might lose caste in Alston's eyes, but some of his bygone ideals were rather dim in his mind now. In the moment of his elation he applied a few drops from the smaller bottle to his heavy mat of graying hair.

CHAPTER XII

"That's what I've come for," the lawyer answered cheerfully, as glad to change the subject as his host was. "He's going to get married."

"Married! Harry! It does not seem possible! Still, at his age I—go on, Alston."

"His fiancée is that dear little Miss Dorothy Mason, a sweet girl, of a good old family. She's an orphan, you remember, and her guardian is Senator Stephenson. He's her uncle."

Hoffman nodded. "I've known him for many years. A fine old gentleman! I am really glad." He spoke slowly now and very thoughtfully. "With all my heart I hope Harry will be happy."

"The foundation for it certainly is there. They love each other very dearly." Alston paused an instant. "Of course no one can foretell the future."

His friend glanced sharply at him and he could have bitten his tongue. He was beginning to feel sorry for old Fred. "Senator Stephenson wishes to see you about——"

There came another interruption. It seemed that never would he be permitted to tell his simple little story in this extraordinary household. This time the break was due to the abrupt intrusion of a rather

"You don't mean it!" Hoffman was very much surprised. "She was a nice woman, too—and such an excellent housekeeper!"

"Perhaps that's why he tired of her," said Alston with some malice.

"Have a cigar?" said Hoffman somewhat hurriedly and turned away to search for one.

He found empty boxes only. There must be, among Bettina's guests, he sometimes thought, those who filled their pockets with his perfectos. They consumed enormous quantities of them. But stowed in a secret chamber of his desk were half a dozen, and he brought them out.

"They surely punished my cigars last night," he said a little ruefully, "but I always have a few where they cannot get at them. Astonishing how some men smoke! But we are surrounded here by a very interesting circle. My wife's old friends principally."

"Of course," said Alston, again feeling the constraint on him. "Don't you smoke a pipe at all in these days?"

"Oh, no; Bettina doesn't like it. It's all very well in the country, she says, but not here. Alston, I got to be a regular farmer there in Belleville. Why, I change my clothes three times a day down here!"

"What a lot of trouble—at your age!"

"Yes; it is," Hoffman granted. "But Bettina says that as a man grows older he ought to be especially careful about his appearance. She draws my attention to everything."

Alston looked at him almost with pity. The man seemed to be half proud of the confession that a

petticoat was ruling him—Fred Hoffman, who had been the terror of the house in Belleville! It was pathetic.

"For instance," Hoffman continued gravely, filling him with new surprise with every word, "she has thought it best for me to give up my after-dinner naps, because they made me stout. The older a man is, she says, the better figure he should have. No matter how tired I may be, she thinks I ought to leave my nap out . . . and sees to it that I do . . . that is, helps me to see to it. She's been sending me on errands after dinner to break me of the habit."

"How considerate of her!"

Hoffman looked sharply at him. Was he making game of him? But the lawyer's face, trained before jury-boxes, was inscrutable.

"Yes, it really is, although it may not sound so," Hoffman went on earnestly, somewhat annoyed because he found himself defending her, where he had only meant to praise. But he could not stop it, now that he had started. He felt that in his praise of her he must find, to some extent, the justification of his act in wedding her. "Oh," he said eagerly, "I could tell you many other little things. She's very careful of me. She doesn't allow me to be troubled with any household details. When I think of how they used to torture me at home—in Belleville—with: 'what do you want for dinner?' 'would you like chops for breakfast?' 'shall we have tea or coffee for lunch to-day?' I——"

"And now," said Alston with a queer look which bothered him, "nobody asks you! What a relief it must be!"

Hoffman again was just a little doubtful as to whether he had made his point.

"Well . . . yes. And Bettina pays the bills, too. I just give her the money and all that is taken care of for me. There in Belleville, why, I had to sign all checks. But say, Alston, life in New York City is expensive!"

"So I've heard."

"But she saves expenses in the household. You have no idea how much cheaper we've been living since we've not had a cook."

Alston was surprised. He could scarcely credit this. "Your wife does the *cooking?*"

"Great Scott, no! We have our meals sent in from Sherry's!"

Alston knew about Sherry's—one of the most expensive restaurants on earth. He gave up hope of Fred. He must have been entirely brought into subjection. "How very clever!" was his comment.

"It really is. They're close by—and such delicious cooking!"

"But rich food, Fred, at our age——"

"Oh, there are a lot of things they send which I can't eat! But my wife says they're all delicious. And so cheap!"

"Yes," said the lawyer tersely. "Sherry is known for his moderate charges." He looked about the elegant, but nondescript apartment—part library, part

drawing-room, part music-room, part, if the presence of some female finery of the more intimate sort could be taken as an evidence, Bettina's dressing-room. "What room is this, anyway?"

"Well, these New York flats, even when they rent as high as this does—I pay five thousand dollars for it——"

"Five thousand dollars *rent?*"

"Yes; that's cheap for this location. But the best of them are crowded. They're not like big houses in the country. This room is almost anything, but I call it my study."

"Your study?" Alston reached behind him and drew from the silver cooler, in which the melted ice had left an inch or two of water, the empty champagne bottle, evidently a relic of the night before. "Is this one of your studies?" He smiled whimsically at his old friend.

Hoffman was annoyed because the room had not been cleaned, but tried to hide it. "What an idea! With my tendency toward gout? Bettina wouldn't let me drink champagne, even if I wanted to!"

There seemed to be a lengthy list of things, thought Alston, which Bettina would not let him do. "But she drinks it, doesn't she?"

"Oh, yes; she's very fond of it. And her guests——"

"They like it, too. I see." The lawyer settled down, anxious not to let Fred see the look of real astonishment and pity which swept across his face. "Well, Fred, I can see that you are contented and

happy. And that's fine." He paused: "But oh, what a nightmare those divorce proceedings were! It cost a great deal of—er—worry; but I suppose all this is worth it. Eh?"

Hoffman did not answer very promptly. "Yes," he said at length, although his eyes evaded Alston's. "Happiness has its price. We must pay for what we get, in one way or another."

He did not like the subject and changed it with a good deal of abruptness. And there was something which he had intended to discuss with some New York attorney. Now that Alston was at hand, he would talk with him about it.

"By the way, talking about paying, my wife has a stepfather, or some such relative now down south in Richmond. Lately he's been pestering her for money. I don't like to talk to her about him, because it makes her nervous. I wish you'd look him up for me, and find out just exactly who and what he is. A sort of black sheep in her family. She's been sending five hundred dollars to him at a time. Her tender heart, you know . . . but——"

Alston's face grew hard. "Her tender heart did not prevent her from insisting upon very handsome settlements from you when you were married!"

"That," said Hoffman, quick to rise in her defense, "was her mother's work; entirely her mother's. I assure you that Bettina never thinks of money. It means nothing to her. She really *cares* for me . . . it's true, Alston! She's so sweet . . . so gentle——"

By one of those unhappy chances with which this life is full, the sweet and gentle lady's voice rose at that instant, speaking to her maid in the adjoining room. One difficulty of New York life is that flats hide family secrets very slightly. They make frank revelations. "You stupid fool!" Bettina was exclaiming, and her voice seemed hard, and not well-bred. "I asked you for the *blue* dressing-gown."

"But——"

There came the staccato sound of a sharp concussion, as if a hand had landed on a cheek, and none too gently. An instant later a flushed and angry servant dashed into the room, her eyes upon the partly opened door through which she had made entrance.

"What's the matter now?" said Hoffman, very much annoyed.

"Madame slapped me!" said the maid upon the verge of wrathful tears.

"A very quiet room to work in and she must be very sweet and very gentle!" Alston reflected sadly as he watched Fred's embarrassed face. But he pretended to have been deaf to all the somewhat startling byplay.

"We're a bit upset to-day," Hoffman told him as he came back to his seat, trying to seem undisturbed. "But my wife will soon be here. She's always up and about by twelve."

"So early? Well, before she comes I'd like to talk of family matters with you."

"Family matters?"

"Concerning Harry."

"Oh, really? What is it?" Hoffman instantly was deeply interested.

Indeed it seemed to Alston, as he glanced at him, that he was almost pathetically eager. He wondered how much he had missed that family which he had so readily given up in favor of this woman who never asked him what he wished for lunch, whose stepfather bled him, and who slapped servants!

"Well, Harry——"

Abruptly, without knocking or any warning whatsoever, a young man strode into the room. He was tall, well-dressed, with flowing hair which undulated as he strode, with long, exceedingly white fingers, with a deep frown upon his brow.

Alston looked at him with real amazement; he noted that his friend looked at him only with annoyance. Could he be accustomed to invasions of the sort? Was it possible that Frederick Hoffman, the intolerant, the gruff, the cynical, had been tamed till he would tolerate this sort of intrusion by this sort of intruder?

"Excuse me," said the apparition, without any signs that, really, he wished to be excused, or thought an excuse necessary. "The piano-tuner is waiting outside." With no further greeting he passed, in what appeared to be abstract excitement, to the handsome instrument which held the center of the room and tapped some of its keys, listening critically to the resulting sound.

Hoffman rose angrily. "What the dev——" he began, but caught himself. "Alston," he said with

great restraint, "this is Mr. Theodore Sevigny, my wife's music teacher."

"Theodore Sevigny?" Where had Alston heard that name? Ah, he remembered! He had a wondrous memory for names. This one had been mentioned by old Murfree long ago when he had spoken of the undesirable who annoyed him by pursuing some young model—the model of the very picture he had given him and which he had so quickly hidden with such an absurd delicacy. What a little world!

He bowed, but the music teacher scarcely noted it. He was resentful of the wording of the introduction. "And friend," he made correction. "I teach only as a great favor." He rolled the "r" in "great" remarkably. "I teach only as a favor, and where I feel that there is a div-vine accord. You understand?" With that he dismissed Alston utterly and turned again to Hoffman with real accusation in his voice. "Your piano was distressingly out of tune last night. It must be tuned at once."

"Tell the tuner to come back later," said Hoffman irritably. "I can't have that noise here now."

Sevigny was first amazed, then most indignant. "Oh, very well!" he said excitedly. "But I shall tell Mrs. Hoffman that I shall not play another note on this piano until it is in tune."

"What a calamity!" There was a touch of the old sarcasm in the Hoffman voice as it said this.

Alston tried not to smile, but Sevigny's deep astonishment was unmistakable. Alston wondered if it might not be that Fred was taking courage because

fat old woman, gorgeously attired, in a fashion which would have better fitted one of half her age.

"My dear Frederick," she was exclaiming as she pattered on her short legs into their presence. "I——"

She saw Alston and stopped suddenly, trying to appear to be embarrassed. It was a failure. The days when she could even seem to be embarrassed had evidently passed. "Oh, pardon me!"

Hoffman rose and introduced them. "My friend and attorney, Mr. Alston—my mother-in-law, Mrs. Curtis."

Alston, now also on his feet, bowed formally.

The vision of unwilling antiquity—her garb was girlish, though her chin was not—advanced upon the lawyer, endeavoring to combine sweetness with a flavoring of biting sarcasm. "Oh, Mr. Alston! At last I have the pleasure of actually seeing the wicked man who treated my poor daughter so unkindly."

"In what way?" The attorney was astonished.

"In drawing up the papers at the time she married Frederick. You were so unkind to her! Almost everything for the—'dear family!'"

"But why all this now?" Hoffman interrupted, much annoyed.

"I did my duty as the friend and the attorney of both sides," said Alston placidly. "I thought Mr. Hoffman was most generous to the—second Mrs. Hoffman."

"Really? Did you think that? I differ most emphatically."

Hoffman's manner showed that he disliked her and

wished to quickly get her gone. "Pardon me, but what can I do for you? You wished to ask me something?"

"Oh, yes; I must speak to you of something so important."

"Can't it wait?"

"No; every moment must be saved. Will you pardon us, Mr. Alston?"

"Well, what is it?" her "dear Frederick" demanded as Alston bowed assent.

"I wish to speak to you in private."

"Mr. Alston is my lawyer, and——"

"Well, I must have five hundred dollars—immediately, my dear Fred!"

"What for?"

"Oh, not for myself. I never ask anything for myself—you *know* that."

He sniffed.

"My son—my darling Arthur—has just telegraphed that he *must* have it—literally *must*—tomorrow afternoon at latest."

"Your good-for-nothing son will get no more money from me," Hoffman said emphatically. He evidently was much less afraid of Mrs. Curtis than he was of Mrs. Curtis' daughter.

"But he must. Bad luck——"

"Let him stop gambling if he doesn't like bad luck!"

"But the dear boy—so young—perhaps a little foolish—but gambling debts are debts of honor!"

"Dishonor, if you have to go to others for the cash

with which to pay them! I'm tired of his kind of honor!"

She was evidently frightened. "But he is so young! When he has sowed his wild oats——"

"He will reap a fine crop!" her son-in-law commented.

She was almost disheartened. "My poor Arthur! I'm afraid he will do something desperate!"

"Don't let that worry you!"

"He will repay you as soon as he can get the money."

Hoffman was exasperated. "Madame, I won't live that long!"

She had been verging upon tears. Now, seeing that his heart was adamant, she stamped her foot and set her lips. "Let us hope not!" she exclaimed and swept out of the room.

For a moment after she had gone Hoffman stood in silence with flushed face. It seemed incredibly ill fortune that all these small humiliations should have piled upon him in the very presence of the man from whom he most desired to hide the fact that any detail was imperfect in this marriage which he had so madly striven to accomplish. But the iron nerve which once had carried him through business deals, when much hung at stake, preserved him. After one long breath he turned the conversation back to Harry without comment on or explanation of what just had happened.

"I fondly hope Harry will be happy," he said gravely. "Do you know—after all that has hap-

pened, people may not believe it, but I assure you it is true—I love my children no less now than . . . in the past." His voice almost broke, but he fought this weakness back as sternly as he had combated his embarrassment. "If anything, I love them more."

"I know, Fred," said his friend, and placed his hand upon his shoulder.

"That they have become . . . estranged . . . that they have forgotten me . . . entirely . . . that grieves me, Alston; grieves me sorely."

Alston, deeply touched, still was not very merciful. "It is you, old man, who have shown yourself estranged. And you must have known that, with . . . this marriage . . . everything would alter."

"Yes; I can understand that, in so far as . . . she . . . as Anna . . . is concerned. Perhaps it was to be expected also in the case of Harry. But as for Beatrice—Beatrice was always my own darling child. Now she does not even want to see me—doesn't even want to see her father! I could not have thought that possible."

"It is in her case that you should be least surprised," Alston answered very gravely. "She's a young girl who had believed her parents' love to be the finest, purest thing in all the world until . . . you know! To her the words 'father' . . . and 'mother' . . . stood for something sacred . . . and inseparable. When she went home

and learned that you had gone away . . . and how . . . and why . . . her whole little world crumbled underneath her feet. Remember, Fred . . . she does not see things through your eyes. How could she?"

"I know; I know. She couldn't understand. And yet, after all, I am her father! She should remember——"

" 'Honor thy father and thy mother!' I am sure she does. When . . . good children . . . do not . . . it is likely not to be their fault, Fred, but the fault of——" He left the sentence incomplete.

"It has been two years since I have seen her," Hoffman reflected slowly. "Two . . . long . . . years! Do you often get over to the house?"

"Very often. I've a standing invitation for Sunday dinner. Which, for some reason, reminds me that I promised to call up the Senator and let him know when you would be at home."

"I shall be very glad to see him at any time.

"Where's your 'phone?"

Hoffman slowly rose to show him, but as they were passing toward the hall, Bettina entered.

She was a different Bettina from the girl whom Alston had seen frequently in Belleville. Very elegantly dressed in a rich house-gown, her really attractive former air of girlish simplicity quite gone, replaced now by an atmosphere of *savoir-faire* and opulence, with perhaps a little arrogance, she swept

in without the faintest trace of that timidity which had been her chiefest and most charming characteristic when he first had seen her in the Hoffman home.

"Oh, Mr. Alston," she said sweetly. "I'm so glad to see you! But I've such a headache!"

"I called on business," he replied politely, but with no warmth of greeting.

"Oh, then, I'm in the way?"

"No, no; not at all, Bettina," her husband urged her. Then, with concern: "Have you a headache?"

She went close to him as Alston half turned again to go toward the 'phone and whispered rather savagely: "Yes, and I can thank you for it!" Her tone was bitter, despite the care with which she spoke. Perhaps, indeed, the care was rather more assumed than real.

Then to Alston, who had heard perfectly and did not know quite what to do: "I have been so vexed! Servants! Unless you treat them like dogs they over-ride you, and if you treat them as they should be treated, then they won't stay with you." Having thus invented an excuse for her first little burst of temper: "You will stay for luncheon, Mr. Alston?"

"I am very sorry. I have an engagement."

"Can't we persuade you? I assure you it's no trouble. My household is so regulated that——"

Involuntarily Alston glanced about the most untidy room.

She caught this. "Why, Fred, how very upset you have made this room look!"

Hoffman relieved Alston of his keen embarrass-

ment and at the same time gave himself a moment for a private conversation with Bettina. He must know what made the air so pregnant of discord. "Come on, Alston, if you wish to 'phone."

Alston bowed slightly to Bettina. "If you would be so good, Fred."

They left the room together, but Hoffman came back almost instantly. "Now, dear——" he began propitiatingly.

But she did not wish to be propitiated. "I want you to know that you have treated my mother very rudely!" She tapped her foot and fingered her gown angrily.

"Rudely?"

"Yes; very rudely. My darling mother, who has so lovingly taken you into our family!"

This apparently did not so very much impress him.

"Now when she asks one little thing——"

He did not weaken. "One thing!" His tone was full of sarcasm.

"You refuse, though it was for my brother!"

"My dear child," he answered seriously, "I am really not in a position to satisfy all the demands which you are making on me." He paused a moment, looking at her. His spirits had a little risen, doubtless, he reflected, because of Alston's visit. "But if you wish," he amiably suggested. "I have no objection to your squandering upon him a little of the income I have settled upon you."

This very much astonished her. "Oh, how selfish!

The idea of asking me to use my poor little funds for Arthur! And you, with all your money!"

He still spoke seriously, not unkindly. "I have use for all my funds just now. My son Harry is about to be married, and——"

She was astonished. "Harry? Really? And he was so in love with me! How unreliable men are!"

"Of course I must properly provide for him.

"Ah," she said angrily. "That's it! Always so liberal with the other side!"

"You knew that I would have to take care of my family."

"But now *we* are your family. What becomes of us does not seem to trouble you!"

"My dear!" said he, reproachfully. And then: "Please don't make a . . . scene! I am tortured enough as it is."

She evidently did not think so, for she began to softly weep. Nothing, she had learned by past experience, tortured him so much as that. "I have sacrificed everything for you . . . my youth . . . my freedom——"

"Bettina," said the harassed man, "I do all I can for you. I think only of your happiness."

"My happiness! Why, any other man would gladly place at my feet whatever I might ask for! But you—from you, if I get anything—how I have to beg for it!"

"You are unjust."

She stamped her foot, she clenched her hands, her voice rose.

"What have I got from you? From life? What have I got? I am young! *I* want to *enjoy!*"

Hoffman had heard Alston say "good-by" out at the telephone, and he motioned her for quiet, asking, meanwhile: "Why, Bettina! I can't understand you. Have I ever denied you anything?"

She laughed scornfully. "Denied me——"

But she saw Alston coming in, and bit her lips, first into quiet, then into a smile of greeting.

"Worst telephone service in the world!" said Alston. "We would not tolerate your metropolitan inefficiency in Belleville. The senator is on his way. He'll be here very quickly. I caught him at a club, almost across the way."

"Dear Mr. Alston," said Bettina, going toward him, "if you can't stay for luncheon, you must promise us the evening."

He shook his head. "I hardly see how I could arrange——"

"Oh, but you must!" She turned to her husband. "Freddie, dear, help me to persuade him!"

"Yes, you must come, Alston."

Her eyes were on him with an intensity that belied her honeyed words and manner. "Freddie, dear, I'm going to mother, now." She put her arm in his, and as Alston gazed at them with a queer incredulity, trying to realize that this was his old friend: "And may I tell her that you will grant her that small favor?"

"Well, to please you, I'll do my best." He spoke

reluctantly, but was helpless in his fear of an outbreak before Alston.

She nestled up to him, smiled into his face and looked across his shoulder roguishly at Alston. "Thank you, dear, so much! And . . . *au revoir,* dear! Don't forget to fix yourself up nicely for luncheon." She held a cheek up for his kiss which he hesitated about giving. "Grouchy old bear, dear, aren't you? What's the matter? Don't you want to kiss your . . . sweetheart?"

In deep embarrassment and without enthusiasm, he kissed her cheek while Alston considerately turned his head away.

"That's a dear!" She swept across the room in her rich gown, gurgling out her throaty little laugh, placed her hand upon the door-knob of the portal of the room adjoining and smiled back at him. "My Freddie!"

"Well, you see how much she cares for me," said Hoffman, fatuously glancing at the lawyer after she had left the room.

"Yes," said Alston noncommittally. "I see."

CHAPTER XIII

Senator Stevenson arrived a little later, before Hoffman had quite finished dressing.

"Tell them to take him into the reception-room," said he when the recently sorely-stricken maid announced the visitor.

"The reception-room floor is being waxed," she answered pertly.

"Then into the small drawing-room."

"The vacuum-cleaner men are working there."

"Well, he can't come here, into a room that looks like this!" said Hoffman helplessly. "Take him to the dining-room. I'll be in almost at once."

"The waiter is setting the table for luncheon. Madame ordered——"

It was hopeless—utterly. "Well, bring him here." The unhappy man glanced somewhat wildly at the sad disorder of the otherwise very elegant apartment. "But you must keep him waiting till you've straightened here a little."

She seemed amazed. "Now? Impossible. I must press Madame's white opera-wrap. She is to wear it to-night. She gave me orders."

Hoffman made a gesture of quite futile rage as she left the room without another glance at him.

"Let's do it ourselves, Fred," Alston suggested blithely, coming to his rescue. "We can keep him

waiting downstairs for a moment. "And," he said, trying to make a joke of it, "it won't be long before the suffragettes will have us men doing all the housework, anyway. Come on!"

"Well——"

"I'll do it. You go in and fix yourself up, as your wife instruc—requested."

"Well, if you could . . . while I put on another coat——"

Alston nodded.

"If you don't know where to put things, throw 'em into my room. That's what they all do here." Hoffman hurried off to find the coat.

With intense diligence the lawyer bent his energies to the task before him. There was the champagne cooler to get out of sight, the lady's underskirt—which, even as he worked alone there, somewhat embarrassed him; he greeted it with almost as deep a flush as that with which he had received the startling picture Murfree had presented to him of the unclad girl; but he must make some disposition of it; and music was scattered almost everywhere. Indiscriminately he stuffed his finds into the champagne cooler and thrust this through the door of Hoffman's room.

He had scarcely skimmed the surface of the much-disordered room when Rose ushered in the Senator. Alston hurried forward.

"Senator, permit me to welcome you. Mr. Hoffman is detained for a few moments."

Senator Stevenson, a gentleman of the old school,

white-haired, frock-coated, superlatively dignified, advanced with outstretched hand.

"Mr. Alston," he said heartily, "I'm glad to see you, sir. It is an unexpected stroke of really good fortune. I confess that I have been feeling that in this meeting with my old—er—old friend, Mr. Hoffman, I should sadly need some moral support. I had not, however, hoped to find it. I am glad you're here, sir. I admit that to a man of—er—of my old-fashioned ideas, a situation of this kind seems most embarrassing. I know the—er—the former Mrs. Hoffman very well. And so, you see, instead of congratulating Mr. Hoffman upon his—er—his change, I'm quite likely to find myself condoling with him."

"I can quite understand, Senator. I have been treading on thin ice myself," said Alston.

"Of course. We must—er—must support each other." The old man smiled a little heavily.

As Alston nodded in agreement to this, Hoffman came out of his room, arrayed in perfect fashion for a New York afternoon. He made a very different figure from the Frederick Hoffman who had won success in Belleville. Alston quizzically smiled at sight of all his elegance—a very private, confidential smile which he shared with himself alone.

"Senator," he said, advancing, "I appreciate the honor of your visit. Pardon me for having kept you waiting. Please be seated."

"Our legal friend," replied the Senator, after he had shaken hands and found a seat, "has—er—has undoubtedly already informed you——"

"Yes, Senator; and I am indeed happy that my son has been so fortunate. I remember your ward as a most lovely girl."

"The young people love each other," said the Senator. "That is the—er—the really important detail. We must not stand in the way of their happiness."

Hoffman smiled at him. "I give my consent with all my heart."

"I presumed as much. Let us now come to the—er—the business side of the affair. I came here to consult with you about the purchase of your residence in Belleville."

Hoffman looked at him with some astonishment. "The place is not for sale. I shall always keep it as a home for my daughter—and her mother." He flushed slightly.

Now the Senator showed definite astonishment in his turn. "I—er—I understood—why that they had —er—had left it and secured another home."

Hoffman turned to Alston with a blank, puzzled face. "Why, I hadn't——" He felt strangely nonplussed, almost hurt. That the old home had been deserted——

"The Senator is right," said Alston.

"That," said Hoffman after a slight pause in which he strove to readjust himself, "alters the case, of course."

"As you know, Fred," Alston explained to him, "your old home—your house—the red brick house—adjoins the Mason estate. Together they would make

a most magnificent property. The Senator has been thinking of presenting it as such to the young people as a wedding gift."

Hoffman had not quite recovered from the shock of his surprise. He had never dreamed that the old home could ever be deserted by Anna and the children. There was a bitter pathos in the thought. It was with difficulty that he even nodded.

"I would be glad to make you an offer, Mr. Hoffman," said the Senator gravely courteous.

Hoffman would not bargain. "I will leave the matter wholly in your hands," said he. "Alston, will you look after any details? I—why——"

"Surely, Fred," said Alston with compassion, understanding perfectly how great the shock had been.

Hoffman sat there somewhat dazed as his wife swept in. "Ah," he said dully as with the other men he rose. "My wife. Bettina, dear—this is Senator Stevenson."

"Mrs. Hoffman!" said the Senator, bowing most profoundly, but not offering his hand.

"Senator, I am delighted." Bettina swept her hand behind her and led forth her mother, who had closely followed her. "This is my mother, Mrs. Curtis."

Sevigny entered as she spoke as unceremoniously as ever.

"And this is an old friend of ours. Mr. Theodore Sevigny, the composer. Of course you have heard of him."

As the Senator was bowing he was shrewdly studying the party. "No, madame," he replied with per-

fect courtesy, but with finality, "I really have—er—not."

She spoke up quickly in defense of the musician. "His music is not for the masses. Only the chosen few are capable——"

"Why should it surprise you, Mrs. Hoffman, when you find those who do not know me?" the composer interrupted with some wounded grandeur. "As history shows has been the case with all the truly great composers, I, too, shall be appreciated only after I am—dead!"

Alston looked at Hoffman with amused delight; Hoffman, flushed, annoyed.

"I won't detain you any longer, Mr. Hoffman," said the Senator, plainly anxious to be off. "Mr. Alston and I can arrange this together. I shall leave you to—er—to your charming family."

But Bettina and her mother would not let him go. With what might be referred to by the irreverent as good teamwork, they almost forced him to a seat on a *chaise-longue*.

"Oh, Senator," said the beautiful young mistress of the "charming family," "you must not be in such great haste. There is so much which I must ask you about Washington. You live there, of course."

"Only while Congress is in session," said the uncomfortable old statesman. "My home is at Belleville."

"They say Washington is beautiful! Have they—many theaters there?" Bettina could not miss a

chance like this. A Senator! And her little sister trying to find influence with managers!

"They have theaters, of course. I rarely—er—find time to go to them."

"I asked because of my young sister, Dolly. She's a wild little tom-boy and she just loves the theater. She insists that she is going on the stage."

"I hope she will recover from—I mean, I wish her all success."

"Mr. Sevigny says her voice is liquid melody! He is so poetic! He is to compose some songs for her."

Of them all, only the gifted youth whom she had mentioned was not listening. He alone paid no attention to the statesman. After a few seconds of the conversation he had found his way to the piano where he now sat with his hands above the keys, not touching them, but moving over them, while his head bowed low, bobbed high, his shoulders heaved, his body swayed.

"Bettina!" he cried suddenly, and all turned to gaze at him. "An inspiration!"

"Hush!" said Mrs. Curtis with an expressive wave of a fat hand instantly attentive to the genius. "He has an inspiration!"

"Oh, if he only had the opportunity!" Bettina exclaimed eagerly. "I am sure the world would listen to him in amazement."

"Amazement! Yes," said Hoffman dryly, and Alston smiled.

"But, my dear," said Mrs. Curtis with a side glance at the Senator, and paying no heed to the two bar-

barians, "in these days even those inspired by divine music must have influence in order to find listeners."

"He has just finished an incredible score," her daughter seconded, turning on the Senator with eager eyes. "Are you, by any chance, acquainted with the managing director of the opera, Senator?"

"No, Madame," said the bewildered lawmaker, "I am not."

"But you certainly have friends who know him, and who would introduce this genius to him," Mrs. Curtis ventured.

The Senator had no time for a reply. "I've got it! Now, I've got it!" came a cry from the piano.

It was a startling exclamation in a perfervid voice. All eyes were turned on the composer who rose in an ecstasy from the piano, grasped wildly for a sheet of music paper lying near, and for a moment scribbled on it madly.

"What is it? What has he got?" the Senator asked Alston with some apprehension.

But now Theodore was standing with a glowing, upturned face, his long hair tossing even as the waves of the sea in stress of storm. He spoke only to Bettina.

"At last!" he cried. "At last it stands before my mental eye—within my grasp! It is complete! The music-drama of the soul! What shall I call it? Ah! *'Love's Torture!'* That will thrill them!"

"It certainly thrills me!" said Alston in an aside to Hoffman.

The Senator was half alarmed and half amused. "I—er—confess I, too——"

"Hush!" said the composer, holding up a warning hand. "Bettina—to the piano!"

She obeyed as he declaimed:

"Two lovers . . . alone . . . at midnight! Fate decrees that they must part! Ah! *Vi-vi-sec-tion of the soul!*" He waved his hands. "See? Staccato! Fine . . . like *needles!* Then . . . and then. . . . a thrill! Then soft . . . and softer . . . like the twitching of a wounded heart!" He gazed into Bettina's eyes. "And you, my dear——"

Startled, she drew back a little.

"——Mrs. Hoffman," he added instantly, "you have inspired it! Listen!"

Although he had invited her to it, he swept Bettina from her place with little ceremony and himself sprang to it in a fine frenzy. Instantly his hands crashed on the keys. He played as one enraptured, throwing off, from time to time, explanatory words. "The needles!" he exclaimed, as one passage sounded through the room. Again: "And then . . . the thrill!"

"How marvelously descriptive!" cried Bettina.

"Wait . . . wait!" said the composer. "Wait!"

Now he played weird chords very softly.

"Is that the twitching of the wounded heart?" the Senator asked Alston in a whisper.

"No," the lawyer answered, "that's the torture!"

And now, fully launched, the man at the piano swept his fingers up and down the keys in crashing chords, in tiddling little tinkelties, in minor wailings in bewildering succession. Finally, completing the *morceau,* he rose, almost exhausted.

"Now, Senator," Bettina cried, delighted, "you see what a genius he is, really?"

"Yes—yes, Madame," replied the Senator, "but—er—but really, I am pressed for time."

CHAPTER XIV

Alston and Hoffman went with Senator Stevenson to the door of the apartment, and, afterward, waited with him for the elevator. Bettina's mother, spellbound, stood gazing after them, but Sevigny sprang from the piano with a vehemence which left the stool-top (of gilt wood, sea-shell shape) whirling dizzily, and approached Bettina who remained with him.

"Stupids!" he cried fiercely. "Bettina! My Bettina! Am I never to see you alone, again?"

"Perhaps to-night," she swiftly whispered. "We have opera seats, but he has been so vicious that I shall not go with him."

Impulsively he seized her hand and kissed it. He was holding out his arms to her for a more intimate expression of his joy, when a hasty hiss from Mrs. Curtis drove them apart. Their expressions of endearment, their implied embrace, she accepted with composure. Her action was no reprimand, but a mere warning that Alston was returning.

Quick as was their separation, the lawyer caught a glimpse of the black-sleeved arm of the musician against the old-rose satin of Bettina's gown, and came to an amazed standstill; but, with almost instantaneous recovery of composure, so quick, indeed, that they did

not suspect that he had seen their slight, unlawful by-play, he joined Mrs. Curtis and was chatting with her when Hoffman followed, smilingly reflecting on the pleasant mission of the Senator. Mrs. Curtis smiled at Alston.

"Such a nice old man—the Senator. And is he rich?" she asked, careful to obtrude her ample person between him and the young folk.

"Yes; very rich."

"Married?"

"Yes'm," said the lawyer, with some emphasis. Then, with a slight smile, looking from her to her daughter, now well separated from Sevigny, who again was seated at the piano: "But that's nothing, ma'am, these days."

Hoffman's face, as he advanced, was in a glow of pleasure. The visits of two men from the old world in the same day had warmed the heart, which had been chilled by two years of the cold aversion of old friends. He had scarcely realized, till now, how much they really meant to him. He even smiled at Rosa, as she intercepted him, extending a tiny salver on which a letter lay.

"A special for you, sir."

He looked at it with that blank stare peculiar to those whose sight the years are dimming, and then fumbled in his pockets. He did not find in them his eye-glasses, and, presently after he had torn the letter open, handed it to the lawyer.

"See what this is, Alston, will you? I can't find my glasses."

"It's from Jersey City," said the lawyer. "Twenty-six Ferd Street."

"Jersey City? Is it?" Hoffman's voice was quite indifferent.

Alston's eyes ran rapidly across the written words. Then he gave him a quick glance of curiosity, in which a little pity blended. "I don't believe I'd better read it, Fred. It's—perhaps you'd rather no one but yourself——"

"Go on, Alston."

The lawyer looked at him with that slightly wistful smile which he had always used when he had seen his big, impulsive friend about to do some foolish thing which he could not approve of nor dissuade him from, or when, after something of the sort was done, he tried to help him out of the resultant scrape. "I'd rather not, Fred."

"Oh, go on, Alston."

"Well! 'Sir,' it starts off. 'You're going to get the scandal and disgrace, since you don't wish to avoid them—you and that young cat, Bettina.' "

"By——"

"Shall I go on, Fred?"

"Certainly." He laughed sourly. "Sounds as if I might have need of you, professionally. Must be some crank. They're after everyone, here in New York."

" 'I have received no reply to my last three letters——' "

"And from Jersey City? It's a crank, all right."

The lawyer's voice was very serious, so serious that Hoffman looked at him with an almost annoyed in-

quiry, as he again inquired: "Shall I go on, Fred? I'd much rather not."

"Certainly, old man; go on. But I know who it's from, now. It was the Jersey City that fooled me. I thought he was in Baltimore. It's from Bettina's stepfather."

" 'I have received no money——' "

"Well, he'll get no more, that's certain. I'm tired of it."

" 'I am in the most desperate position, while the whole amount which would be needed to release me would be but a trifle to a man of your great means. Twelve hundred dollars, that's all——' "

Hoffman snorted in his wrath. " 'Twelve hundred dollars, that's *all!*' I wonder if he thinks I'm here for nothing but to hand out money to him! I've already——"

" 'You have never sent a cent to me; Bettina, the ungrateful girl, has never helped me with a penny, although she knew of my sore need. Now I shall do something, if you don't look out! Mark you—if she had sent me anything——' "

"Never sent a cent to him! I've given Bettina money for him half-a-dozen times!" Hoffman exclaimed angrily—so angrily that his voice carried into the adjoining room.

Bettina, greatly startled, left Sevigny and came hurrying toward them. Her face was rather pallid, but the two men, absorbed in the surprising letter, did not even see her.

" 'If I do not have the money by to-morrow after-

noon, I will see to it that you have a scandal worse than that which drove you out of your old home. Bettina and—well, wait!' "

"What are you reading, Mr. Alston?" she asked breathlessly.

"He's reading me a letter threatening scandal—a letter demanding money—a blackmailing letter—written by your mother's—second venture," Hoffman explained angrily.

"Do you reproach me for it?" It might have been that worry gave it a timbre which she did not intend, but her voice sounded insolent, defiant.

Her mother, scenting trouble from afar, hurried to her side. "Surely my child is not to blame for my misfortune!" she exclaimed.

Her appearance annoyed Hoffman. The whole thing annoyed him. That he should have fallen into the mistake of asking Alston to read to him this letter, of all letters, had put him in a dangerous temper—Alston, whom he wished above most men to think his second marriage had quite justified the sacrifices it had cost!

"Madame," Hoffman snarled, "you are not in this conference."

But she was not to be denied. "She's no more to blame for my misfortunes than I am for hers—the fact that she has tied herself to a man old enough to be her father!" she snapped nastily. "I urged her not to. I urged her to select some young and single man!"

Hoffman gazed at her in speechless wrath, a rare and ominous state for him.

"Madame," said Alston calmly, "your daughter was old enough to know what she was doing." It angered him to have Fred baited in this way.

"It's not so much the difference in ages," said the fat old woman, very angrily. "But a man with two grown-up children . . . and everything going to them. while my daughter——"

Hoffman advanced on her as in Belleville he had sometimes marched on Barbie. It for the moment silenced her, although, while his lips twitched in a fury, he still could find no words.

Alston turned back to his friend. He could not let the man be robbed. "You say your wife has frequently sent money to this man?"

"Why, yes. In all, it must be four or five hundred dollars."

"Have you any receipts?"

He turned to his wife, who, now plainly worried, was standing, tapping a rich oriental rug with nervous feet: "You have, haven't you, Bettina? You know I told you to be sure——"

Bettina, flushed, still more ill at ease, glanced at him, sullenly. The worry underlying the unexcused defiance on her face—no one had accused her of wrongdoing—was apparent to them all. Alston, from his long practice as a cross-examiner, wise in estimating women in emergencies, knew that she stood cornered in some lie.

"I have no receipts!" she snapped viciously.

"But I told you——"

"Please don't assume that dictatorial manner toward

me!" She looked at her husband with fierce antagonism in her eyes. "It is entirely unnecessary, and it does not become you!" Her foot tapped the rug with added viciousness.

He was nonplussed. "But, Bettina, you know I told you——"

"Well," she said defiantly, "you may as well know now as later. I haven't sent him any money!"

"But you told me that you had . . . and your accounts of your expenditures, which you showed me, recorded——"

"What of it? I used the money for myself."

Alston caught a quick glance from her toward Sevigny, who now was standing, white-faced, tremulous, in the doorway of the drawing-room. As well as if he had been told of it by a reliable banker, he knew the woman had been giving money to the scared pianist.

Hoffman was incredulous. He had supplied her, with lavish hands, for her own needs. "Yourself! For heaven's sake—what for?"

For a moment she did not find words. Then: "What for? Did you imagine I could get along with what you gave me? Did you expect me to wear costumes made of calico, as they do . . . in Belleville?"

"A young and pretty woman," said her mother, trying to come to her rescue, "must have pretty gowns."

Hoffman silenced her with one black glance. Then he turned to his wife. "But only last week I paid half-a-dozen dressmakers' bills, one of them of five hundred and one of them four hundred and fifty dol-

lars! At this rate, you would spend a fortune every year!"

"When she's as old as you are," said her mother venomously, "she will spend much less."

"I didn't ask your opinion, Madame!" Hoffman thundered at her.

Now the fat woman shrank back, really frightened. This tall old man could be intensely terrifying when he whirled about and threw his words out, that way. Barbie could have told her that.

"Don't mind him, mother dear." Bettina spoke protectingly, and swept her husband with a scornful glance. She had no doubt that she could manage him, even if it proved to be a little difficult. "He does not seem to understand that I have a right to demand a great deal more than he gives me." She spoke almost accusingly. "He does not seem to realize that he should not begrudge me a few paltry dresses."

Hoffman's fury blazed, now, at them both, and, to save himself from saying something very brutal, he turned and strode toward Alston. As he did so he caught sight of the pianist. He had forgotten the man's presence.

"You here? Begone!" he briefly ordered.

But Sevigny was aroused. His Latin blood boiled fiercely.

"What have these sordid details to do with a sensitive nature, such as hers?" he cried, while Hoffman paused, to gaze at him in dumb surprise.

The pianist marched boldly up to him and faced

him fiercely: "Beast! You do not appreciate her personality!"

Hoffman's face grew slowly purple; his chest heaved. Bettina started toward them.

"There should never be a discord in her life!" Sevigny cried.

Then, as Hoffman started toward him, he drew a handkerchief from a tail-pocket in his handsome coat, flashed it in the air in front of him, in such a manner that it almost snapped in Hoffman's face, whirled upon his heel, not hurriedly, and, with much dignity, stalked out, quite unconscious that with the handkerchief had come an envelope, square, perfumed, sealed, addressed to him in the handwriting of Frederick Hoffman's wife.

It fell almost at Alston's feet, but, so absorbed was he by the unpleasant scene, that he was scarcely conscious of it. He did not stoop to pick it up.

Mrs. Curtis did not see it. Frightened, she followed the composer.

"If you'll excuse me, Fred," said Alston slowly, "I'll go downtown. If you want to find me, you'll know where to get me, after dinner. I've arranged to dine—with an old friend." He refrained from saying that the friend was Murfree, because he did not wish to bring into the conversation the man who, innocently, had been the cause of introducing into Hoffman's life the woman who, the lawyer now felt sure, had wholly wrecked it.

"All right, Alston," Hoffman answered gloomily. "And write a letter to that . . . person, will you?

Give him anything in reason, now; but make it clear that I must never hear from him again."

Alston carelessly picked up the letter, as if it might have been something he, himself, had dropped. With it in his hand he left the room.

Bettina kept scornful eyes on him until he disappeared, then turned to Fred and sneered. Then she strode past him toward the door of her own room.

Alone with her, Hoffman's anger cooled. "Bettina!" he said, somewhat brokenly, swayed by the reaction. If this bubble burst, then what would life have left for him?

She stopped, stood rigid, looked at him with icy eyes. "Well, what is it?"

"Have you nothing that you . . . wish to say to me?"

"Not that I know of!" Her voice was full of scorn.

"Haven't you a word of apology, or . . . explanation?"

She threw her head back scornfully. "Apology? Who? I? Explanation! You humiliate me before . . . everyone . . . and then expect *me* to apologize!"

He answered dully. "I never dreamed that you had not used that money as you told me that you had. Otherwise, I should not have said what I did before Alston. Really, Bettina, as far as money is concerned . . . but it pains me to think that you——"

"Of course!" she cried angrily. "It always pains you when money is concerned!"

This hurt him. "That is not true! I have given

gladly, generously, as far as I am able. I have been much distressed—keenly—when money matters have, of late, so often risen in discussion. But you are like a child. You place no value upon money. I must remind you, dear, that our expenses far exceed our income."

He sat upon the *chaise longue* and held his hand out to her. She took it with reluctance, frowning deeply.

"Bettina, we must talk this over, very carefully. We can live comfortably—very comfortably—and still economize a little."

She had sunk to the seat beside him, but very far from graciously. Now she turned her head away from him, as if disgusted. "Economize!" she cried. "Forever, it's economize! I was brought up on that word. It's been nagged at me ever since I was a child. And now, I think, at last, that I have a rich husband and am well provided for; but no! Still, forever and forever the same word, 'economize!'"

"But, my dear, it must be done. I have told you that my son is soon to marry. I . . . must provide for him." He said this reluctantly. He had planned to tell her at a more propitious time.

"How?" she said, with very lively interest, for the first time looking at him squarely.

"It is my intention to turn the business over to him. Of course he will pay us a handsome yearly sum, but——"

This angered her intensely, instantly. "So, that's it! You are to retire upon a pension! And the

'young gentleman' will pay us a yearly stipend . . . enough for us to live on . . . if we . . . *economize!* A delightful prospect! A de-light-ful prospect!"

Passion so thrilled in her voice that he looked at her astonished.

"But I tell you I have a right to demand more than that!" she went on, the words rushing from her lips in scathing anger. "And I will let no one rob me of my rights! What do you think I *married* you for? What *for?* That I should be deprived of *everything?"*

"Bettina! What are you deprived of?" He rose and stood before her. His eyes were losing their pained gentleness.

She brought her hands down at her sides in two fierce blows upon the cushions. "Of *everything!"* she cried. "Of *everything!* My happiness!"

He literally staggered as he took the blow. "Don't say that, Bettina!"

She felt no pity for him; her anger was too great. She shrugged her shoulders in a fury, rose, went to the piano, stood there, tearing into bits the flowers that hung from a great vase. The tapping of her foot was not now deadened by a rug. Upon the hardwood floor her slipper beat the fast tattoo of her wrath.

"I . . . did not know," he stammered, deeply hurt. "I—I did not know that you . . . had found no happiness with me! Bettina . . . is this . . . true?"

"You should have known it, long ago." She spoke as if impatient of more silly pretense.

" 'I . . . should have known it long ago!' " he

quoted, incredulously. "Tell me, Bettina, why did you marry me?"

She spoke as if she did not think it really mattered. "I was young, inexperienced—oh, some things are beyond human calculation."

He looked at her in silence for a moment and then caught up her final word, repeating it very slowly: "*'Calculation!'* Yes! That *is* the word!"

She leaned on the piano, still speaking carelessly, almost flippantly, insultingly. "I was young . . . inexperienced . . . and hoped that . . . well, that in the course of time I should become . . . accustomed to you!"

This cut into his soul. "Oh, I see! I s e e !"

She whirled upon him as upon one who had done her an irreparable injury. "You should have known that youth . . . and——"

"Go on, say it!" he cried bitterly. "That youth and age——"

"Don't go together," she completed, cynically.

He bowed his head and left the room without another word. In the hall he found a hat and coat and put them on. He opened, passed through, and closed the heavy door of polished copper, rang the elevator-bell, stepped into the car, when it came presently, and, stumbling a little as he left it, stood in the lower hallway almost dazed.

The hallman looked at him with sympathetic curiosity. He liked the gray old man and pitied him. He had often watched and speculated on the callers who visited the Hoffman flat while Hoffman was

away. He knew far more about them than the man who paid the rental knew. And to-night this tenant seemed so old!

Again pausing for a moment, Hoffman stood in deep reflection upon the top stair of a flight which, by a broad, carved stone archway, led to the street. Then he turned and spoke to the attendant.

"I . . . forgot to call a friend up," he said slowly. "Is there a telephone down here?"

"Yes, Mr. Hoffman, just behind the elevator."

Hoffman went around the cage of ornamental iron and was astonished when he found booths there, in charge of a young girl. Long as he had been a resident in the house, he had not known of their existence. Such discoveries always startled him, ever made him homesick. New York was all so vast, impersonal! Oftener than he admitted to himself he yearned back toward the old Belleville days, when he had had neighbors who were curious about him and about whom he was curious!

"Will you get the Holland House for me?" he asked the girl.

"Forgot to call from upstairs, did you Mr. Hoffman?" she inquired politely, as she thrust the brass plug in and out of a mysterious orifice. "Step into Number One booth. I'll have them for you in a moment."

When she had connected him with the hotel where Alston was a guest, he asked them to ring up his old friend's room.

"Out," said the attendant, another girl, and also pleasant voiced.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Hoffman's real distress was plain in the three words.

"He left word he'd be at Mr. Murfree's studio, on Eighth Street, if anybody called him up," the operator volunteered. "Wait, I've got the number here."

"Ah, thank you," Hoffman said, when she had told him what it was.

He decided to go down to Murfree's studio. The artist would be glad to see him. He had intended to look up Murfree immediately after he took up residence in New York, but Bettina had seemed most unwilling to consent to it. She had urged that minor artists were by no means of the manner of the friends whom they must make. But now he would go down and see him; it would cheer him up; and, too, he must see Alston.

It was after eight when he alighted from a taxi in the unfamiliar portion of the town in which the studio was located. He paid the man and made an inquiry on the ground floor as to where to go, upstairs.

When he paused before the designated door, he heard Alston's voice and one which he could dimly recognize as that into which the voice of the young Murfree he had known at college might well have developed. Somehow they thrilled him with a sense of comfort. Old friends! Old friends are best! But he—how far had he adventured from old friends! It suddenly flashed through his mind that he had—ah, deserted!—the best old friend of all; but he fought the thought away from him and knocked. He never let himself remember Anna!

"Come in!" a voice called from within.

He strode into the room, with hand outstretched. "Hello, Murfree!" he exclaimed with a cordiality almost pathetic.

Murfree looked at him with startled eyes. "Fred Hoffman! Fritzie!" he exclaimed.

"I've been intending to come down to see you ever since I've been in New York City."

"I'm—er—mighty glad to see you, Fred," said Murfree. Hoffman did not note the scared, uneasy look the artist cast about the room as he spoke.

"Hello, Alston," Hoffman went on, urged by the reaction from his gloom into a rush of cordiality. Old friends! These would not fail him. "They said at the hotel that you were here."

Upon Alston's face, as he rose to greet him, was an expression hard to analyze. Even as he held out his hand, he threw a quick glance at the artist.

This time Hoffman noticed it. "Am I . . . intruding?" He felt strangely chilled. Was he welcome nowhere? In his own house he was not. And were these old friends sorry he had come to join them?

"Why, no, Fred; intruding? Certainly, you're not," said Alston, but as he spoke he sent another quick glance toward their host. "Sit down."

Hoffman determined to accept such hospitality as came, at its face value. "Wait till I take my coat off. Where shall I hang it? On the floor? It would be like old times in Murfree's diggings!" The man's anxiety for something pleasant was pathetic. If only these two would be jolly, would be reminiscent, would

help him forget the scene which he had just endured!

"I'll take it," Murfree answered nervously, Hoffman thought, and seized it, almost before his arms were free of it. "Sit down," he urged, and pushed a chair out hastily. "Sit down, old man, sit down. You must be tired. The walk——"

"Came in a taxi, Murfree. Don't walk much in these days. Getting old, you know, though I've fought against admitting it!" It was fine to be here, with these two old friends! Surely it would help him to forget! "Let me look around your shanty." How good the old-time college slang was tasting on his tongue! "So you made a living out of painting, after all! Let me see some of your work."

"All right, old man; all right. Glad to. Damned glad to see you! You sit down and I'll bring out the best of it. Light's rotten anywhere but here!"

"Sit down? Why should I? I'm not as old as *that!* Don't you take a bit of trouble. Just let me nose around and find it."

"No, no, Fred; do sit down," said Alston, and, between them, they forced him into a chair before the fire.

Again, as they did this, Hoffman seemed to catch a sort of secret glance between them, and was puzzled by it, but he refused to let it make him feel uncomfortable. He was pathetically anxious to be welcomed. He was so glad to be with them. So glad to contemplate the prospect of bright talk of happy days!

"Well, if I sit down, old Murfree's got to bring his pictures here for me to look at," he said gayly. "I

won't believe he's made a living out of painting till he proves it!" He laughed heartily. "As soon as I get back my breath and someone gives me a big drink of something mellow, we're going to sing 'Auld Lang Syne' together. Eh?"

"Sure, I'll bring 'em to you," Murfree agreed. "Get down into a chair. You're far too old to stand around. I'm six months younger. And it's youth that——"

"For God's sake," said Hoffman, fervently, "don't *you* begin to talk about my age!"

"I was talking of my own," said Murfree. "You sit down. And I'd kind of like to try some of the old songs. My voice is very likely cracked, but——"

But, though the little scene was carried on as if in jest, the feeling was in Hoffman's heart that something had embarrassed his two friends. It was with real difficulty that he put it from him as ridiculous and smiled cordially at Alston as Murfree vanished in the shadows at the dim, and dirty, very large old room's far end.

A moment later he was conscious that a light behind him had been suddenly turned off.

"Here," he cried. "Stop that! Don't you try to make me think your pictures are worth while by showing them to me in such a gloom that I can't see how bad they are!"

"They need gloom, most of them," Alston commented dryly.

"You bring them on, and leave the lights just as they are!" commanded Hoffman.

"All right, Fred," said the artist, and instantly began a rummaging, which sounded as if he were turning over many canvases.

And that, indeed, was just what he was doing. With feverish haste he was reversing canvases in all parts of the room. The few which he set hurriedly aside to show to Hoffman were not among his best—but they were the safest.

In his haste to hide some and drag out others, which, because they were inferior, had been standing in remote and hidden corners, he tripped upon a rug and fell—fell heavily.

Alston and Hoffman both sprang to their feet. The artist lay quite motionless upon the floor.

"Heavens, Murfree, are you hurt?" said Alston, running in to him.

Murfree lay across the canvas which he had been moving—a large picture, unframed, on a stretcher, now face downwards.

"Here, let me help you, Alston," Hoffman cried. "See? He cut his head upon the corner of that easel! By George, it's bleeding! Where's the water in this place?"

"Over in the corner there. Bring a wet towel."

Hoffman hurried on the errand. When he returned, Alston had turned the artist over.

"Lift him, while I pull this picture out from under him," cried Hoffman; "we'll leave him on the floor till we find out what has happened, but that stretcher hurts his back."

Alston, forgetting all else in the excitement of this

accident, did as he was told, and Hoffman pulled the picture out from under the unconscious man. But he left it lying on the floor, face downward.

"He's coming around, all right," said Alston. "Help me to get him to that couch."

They managed it, and, as Murfree slowly regained consciousness beneath their ministrations, Hoffman stepped back to raise the fallen picture. As he did so the light fell full on it.

He gasped. Before his eyes he saw a beautiful white slave girl, her wrists manacled and chained. An old man, who held the chain which joined a leathern belt about her waist, was dragging her out of an Eastern auction mart; she was pulling back, rebelliously, and, with one loosely linked and slender arm, was appealing to a youth who stood, dejected, in the door of a bazar.

"Bettina!" he said, startled.

"God!" breathed Alston.

The reviving Murfree started up, richly cursing.

"Murfree . . . Alston . . ." said the shocked and sickened man, "what . . . does that mean? . . . That hellish picture!"

"Why——"

"What does it mean? Tell me! It is my *right* to know!"

With difficulty, trying to make it seem less horrid, constantly exclaiming that she was a good girl, even if she had posed for him, Murfree told the miserable story.

"I never knew just how she posed . . . until to-night," said Alston, miserably. "I never would have——"

"God! Why did you let her come to us?"

"She was a good girl," Murfree still protested. "I always tried to help her. I—I loved her mother, once."

"That . . . terrible old woman!" This from Hoffman's harsh, unnatural voice.

"She was not terrible in those days; and, in memory of them, I tried to help the daughter. I wanted her to get out of New York. There was a damned musician—an infernal young pianist——"

"Was his name Sevigny—Theodore Sevigny?" Hoffman asked.

"Yes; that's the fellow. I was afraid for her because of him. I wanted her to leave New York. I . . . meant well enough."

"My God!" said Hoffman, brokenly. Then his voice rose, tremulous with anger: "He's with her now, no doubt; he's always with her! Fool! Fool! Poor, blind fool that I have been!"

Alston stood in deep reflection. The thought which had occurred to him was at first repellent. But now, if ever, was the time to save his friend. He had not yet examined the letter he had picked up at the flat. He did not know what it contained. It might be wholly innocent; upon the other hand it might be otherwise—and who could tell what witch-power of cajolery the woman might have over Fred? Now that he was really in battle against her could he, Al-

ston, who despised her, who for years had loved in secret the sweet woman she had wronged, refrain from giving him what might be not only useful as a weapon, but something which would spur him on to contest if his anger cooled, or if her fascination still had charm for him?

"Fred," said he, slowly, as he handed him the letter, "here is something which Sevigny dropped. I don't know what is in it. But she addressed the envelope . . . to him. It feels like . . . money?"

Hoffman took it, stared at it, and opened it. In the envelope were three one-hundred-dollar bills and a note, also in his wife's handwriting. He glanced at it. It was enough.

He glared about him somewhat wildly, saw his hat and coat, seized them, hurried from the room. It was fifteen minutes later when a horrid thought occurred to Murfree.

"Heavens, Alston! Will he kill him? Will he kill them both if he is with her?"

"I must get up there," Alston exclaimed, panic-stricken at the thought. "Poor chap! He's suffered enough without winding up with that!"

. . . . . .

Hoffman promised the first taxi-driver whom he found a double fee for haste, and rushed back to his apartment-house at reckless speed. He had not the least idea of what he meant to do. The thought of murder, which at first came to him, he put quickly from him, because of what a tragedy in which he figured would mean to Beatrice and Harry. He had

not thought about them, very much, of late. He surely must not leave them such a heritage!

But it was with a grim, hard face that he went into the ornate apartment, where, in his madness, he had hoped to find true happiness, despite the fact that he had sought the boon through devious ways, with ruthless inconsideration for the rights and happiness of others. That he had done this burst upon him for the first time now. For the first time he felt remorse for his own sins.

"Where is Mrs. Hoffman?" he asked Rosa, in a tone that frightened her. He had had to ring for his admission. In his excitement he had gone out without his keys.

"In the dining-room," she stammered. "The three . . . young gentlemen are here—Mr. Sevigny and the others."

"Tell her to come to me, at once."

"But——"

"Tell her to come!"

She entered, scornfully, and stood looking at him.

"Bettina!"

"Well!"

"Bettina, did you mean what you said before I left the house, an hour or two ago? I . . . have especial reasons for desiring to make sure."

"Mean it? Of course I mean it!" she said, coldly, arrogantly. He must learn that it would be more comfortable if he took a different attitude toward her. She would show him that she was not Anna Hoffman, to be bulldozed into silence, or frightened into carry-

ing out his wishes when her own ran counter to them!

"Use your own common-sense," she went on, bitterly. "You'll admit that you're not exactly the sort of man to inspire a romantic passion in a girl like me! And now you are refusing to give me anything in place of it! It would be the least thing that you could do."

She could not make quite sure of the expression on his face; the light was behind him. But she imagined it must be a frightened and submissive look. Of course he could not stand out long against her. It was naturally a certainty that he had come to her to sue for peace. She must take full advantage of it.

He did not reply; she thought this fact encouraging.

"So . . . don't make that foolish arrangement for Harry with the business!" she went on. "And *don't* be everlastingly preaching economy to me . . . and cutting down expenses!"

She had not the least idea that to say these things was the most unwise thing which she had ever done, in all her life; she had not the slightest thought that he had come there to accuse, not to accept criticism.

"I warn you . . . I won't stand it!" she said angrily. "I won't stand it! . . . And the sooner you make sure of that the better we shall get along together."

He said absolutely nothing, which nonplussed her, but did not dismay her. She argued that her ultimatum must have dazed him.

"I think I've made myself clear," she added, sneeringly.

He spoke, now, and with the first tone of his voice she knew that she had been in error.

"Yes, quite clear," said he, "and I, also, must make things very clear! I wish to tell you——"

She was frightened—and her friends were in the dining-room. They had been drinking his best liquors merrily. She was sorry she had taken just that attitude. Still, she could manage him, all right, of course.

"Not just now," she interrupted, trying, when too late, to placate him. "We'll talk it over to-morrow."

She turned as if to go away, but he caught her arm and held her back. She had surely been mistaken in her method. It was a terrifying, almost painful, grip which he took of her arm.

"Not to-morrow," he said sternly. "Here and now we are going to understand each other—you and I."

"But, Fred, my friends are waiting! Let me *go.*" Her tone was definitely pleading. All the arrogance had gone from it.

"Let them wait . . . those parasites that you call friends . . . those hypocrites who come here to make love to you and fatten, while they sneer at me!"

"Oh! . . . Oh! . . ."

"I won't have them here! Tell them to go!"

"But——"

"I am the master of this house; not you, nor they! Tell them to go, or I shall tell them for you!" He started toward the door.

She rushed to intercept him, and stood panting in his path, as madly angry as a wounded tigress. She

expressed her wrath in vicious sneers, and harsh, sarcastic laughter as she spoke. "Oh, so you intend to regulate my life, do you? To choose my friends for me! Do you imagine I intend to lead the dead existence which satisfied the former Mrs. Hoffman?"

He spoke quickly, sternly: "Don't speak her name!"

"Why not? Has she suddenly become a saint in your eyes?"

"Yes . . . and I have been in Murfree's studio to-night!"

This shocked her horribly. It was a wholly unexpected blow. *"F r e d !"*

"I see the truth. I know, now, what I've done! And neither you nor I . . . we are not *fit* . . . to speak her name. *You!* At last I know what you——"

"Hush! Not so loud!" she urged, in an agony. "They'll *hear* you, Fred! *Please* don't."

"*Let* them hear!" His voice rose fiercely until it rumbled through the place like thunder. "I'd like to shout it so that all the world would hear! I'd like to warn all men against such women as you!"

She ran to him and clung to him. "Fred, *don't!* Come, Fred! Let's not quarrel!"

Not roughly, but almost with disgust, with a gesture of finality, he thrust her hands away.

"Listen to me, Fred!" Again she clasped her arms about his neck. "Don't you love me, Fred?"

He shook her clinging body from him, as if he felt it to be a contamination.

"I'VE DONE WITH YOU. . . . GO!" p. 333.

"*No!*" he exclaimed. "Do you think I'm still the poor, mad fool whom you can twist and bend? *No!* Your power over me is dead! It is you, yourself, who have destroyed it . . . and so go! Go to your . . . friends, in there. Go to your composer, who has fattened on my substance . . . go to your lover!"

This roused her from her trance of fear, a little. "How dare you accuse me——"

He drew the letter from his pocket, deliberately tore the envelope wide open, took the money from it, tucked it in his pocket, and threw the written sheet and mutilated envelope upon the table at her side.

She shrank back, almost in collapse.

"How dare I?" He spoke, now, with deadly calm. "That! And many other things. Have I not told you that I spent the evening with your old employer, Murfree? I see through you now—see through and through you, down to your shabby and bedraggled soul! You . . . the woman who lies and deceives! The woman who steals from her husband to give to her lover! . . . The——"

"Oh!"

"Yes, your lover! Someone must pay the price, since he cannot! Well, I have paid it . . . the respect of my friends, the love of my wife and children! They've all been offered up for you!" Now his wrath and horror reached a frenzy. "I've paid! I've paid! But now go back to your friends! Go back to your composer and your trade! Lie . . . deceive . . . betray! . . . I've *done* with you . . . *Go!*"

CHAPTER XV

When Frederick Hoffman's eyes opened they saw the white walls of a hospital room surrounding him. A nurse was gently bathing his forehead with a cooling lotion, a physician stood beside him, and Alston's sympathetic eyes were fixed on him from the bed's foot. His head was heavily bandaged.

He tried to form a question.

"You fell," said Alston, anticipating his endeavor. "You fell. Just dizziness; not a real stroke, old man. It's been a tight squeak for you; but you're all right, now. I've been a very busy man, with Murfree and you both."

"How is Murfree?"

"He's all right, now."

"You'd better telephone . . . Bettina."

"Everything has been attended to, old man. You've been here a week, you know."

"A week!"

"Yes," said the physician. "You must not talk much. You've turned the corner splendidly. We're going out now, Mr. Alston will come back to-morrow. You mustn't worry."

Alston nodded reassuringly, smiling his peculiarly sweet smile.

"I'm going to let you have a good long talk with

him to-morrow," said the doctor, soothingly. "In the meantime you are in fine shape for a really restful sleep. Your temperature has dropped splendidly."

"But——"

"Wait until to-morrow. You'll be all right then. Now get some sleep."

Beckoning to Alston, the doctor left the room; the nurse, smiling and refusing to reply to questions, made Hoffman very comfortable; he slept.

Alston found himself much puzzled as to how best to explain the situation when he went to him next day. He determined to let events shape up as best they would.

"How are things, at the . . . flat?" asked Hoffman.

Alston hesitated. "Well," said the lawyer, after a little thoughtful hesitation, "I went there, this morning and had such of your things as I had saved from the sale boxed up and——"

" 'Saved from the sale?' "

"Yes; Mrs. Hoff—your wife . . . you know you'd put the whole thing in her name . . . well, she thought she'd have a sale, and . . . go away for —er—a little while."

"Bettina . . . go away? When is she coming here to see me?"

"I don't think she'll have time, Fred, to stop in here, at all. You see——"

"Alston, tell me what has happened."

"Perhaps I'd better. You've been out of business

quite a while, now. It's been your lucky period, old man. All your troubles have been cured, as well as that concussion of the brain your fall gave you."

"Alston, for God's sake——"

"Yes, yes, old man. You've been very, very lucky. You see, I took the news of your unfortunate accident to Mrs.—er——"

"Bettina?"

"Yes. Somehow, I never could get used to calling her—er—— She was not as much—well, Fred, she didn't feel as deeply as I thought she should, and her mother—how I hate that damned old woman, Fred! I think she'd like to marry me. My God! She began courting me! What a place it was . . . your —er—flat. I can't call it your 'home.' "

"Alston, it never was a home to me."

"No; I fancy not. Well, we had quite a little conversation. Rather spirited it was, old man. Bettina said you had denounced her, told her you were through with her."

"I had, but——"

"I was pleased to hear it, and I said so. Well, the upshot was that it developed, as we talked, that you had not come up to—er—her expectations. She said rather frankly that you had not been as . . . generous . . . as she had hoped you would be."

"Generous! Why——"

"I know. Well, that poor creature, the pianist——"

"Sevigny?"

"Yes, Fred. He's sold an opera, at last. God

save the audiences! He came in to tell her of it while I talked with her, and . . . I didn't like the way she took the news. You see, you were here, injured. And you know what we learned about them from old Murfree. Well, I spoke up rather sharply. And——" He hesitated.

"Go on, Alston."

"Well, Fred . . . man, dear, how I hate to tell you!"

"Go on, Alston." Hoffman's face was pitiable. All the old-time arrogance seemed to have gone out of it, with the disappearance of the florid flush of health. It was not only pale beneath its bandages, but a hint of pathos had been substituted for its cold, hard pride.

"No, I'm not going to tell you what she said," the lawyer finally determined, "except to make it clear to you that she admits she married you for no cause save your money; that she loved Sevigny all the time; that, now that he has been successful, she prefers his company to yours."

"Good God!"

"Yes; God *is* good, or He would not have offered you this chance of escape. I'm afraid the woman's not been very square with you, old man—not very square. This man has been with her a lot, and——"

Hoffman's big frame stiffened in the small, white bed. "I . . . know!"

"You've had two narrow escapes instead of one. The first was from a fracture of the skull, the second

was from a fracture of the heart. You see, you were certain to be shocked by some terrific scandal, even if she hadn't left."

"Left?"

Alston stood and blinked at nothing, as he had a way of doing at such times as other men would have selected for theatricals; he blinked at nothing, and was very mild and unimpressive. "Yes, Fred; she's gone off with her Theodore."

Hoffman shivered in his bed.

"You always were a lucky dog!"

"Alston——"

"I had them rather foul, old man. I shall never tell you all about it. She's signed back what you gave her. I saw to it. And the composer really deserves what he will get. I never knew a man who needed drastic punishment much worse. He'll get it, Fred; he'll get it. It ought to be a little satisfaction to reflect that the man whom she elected to run off with was the man who most deserved such punishment."

"Old man——"

Again the lawyer interrupted him, with a hand upon his shoulder. He bent above the bed a face full of compassion; but there was rejoicing in it, too.

"Don't talk about it, Fred. It's ended. Just remember that. It's a blank wall. You cannot climb it. Your past, with her, is shut off as completely as if it had been but a dream from which you have awakened."

The man's flushed face, in which anger battled with chagrin, was terribly contorted. "I'll——"

Alston stopped him. "No, you won't You'll lie here and get well, as soon as possible. You big, blundering old Fritz! You don't know how to manage anyone outside of business, least of all yourself. You've made a mess of things." The lawyer laughed a strange, slight laugh. "I'm going to take charge of you from now on. You need a manager. I'm it."

For a long time Hoffman lay in a blank silence, looking up at the white ceiling of the little hospital room.

"Will it be all right, Fred? Are you going to let me manage you? I've got some plans."

"What are they?"

"Go to thunder! I won't tell you. If I manage you, I manage you. If I don't, I wash my hands of you. I shan't be able to, but I shall try."

"All . . . right . . . Alston."

. . . . . .

They were busy days which followed for the lawyer; for his friend they were strange periods of self-appraisal and of difficult adjustment to the new valuation which he found himself compelled to make in the face of an enforced enlightenment He knew agony at last; for the condemnation of himself which now swept over Frederick Hoffman was not an emotion to be shaken off, impatiently, as the prickings of his conscience had been, in the past. If Alston had condemned him, then, probably, his natural an-

tagonism would have been aroused to fight for his stiff pride, to battle for the justification of the acts which, in his heart, he knew had been worth punishment, and of which he knew his present pain, humiliation, and confusion formed that penalty. But Alston spoke not one condemnatory word.

He shrewdly, sadly guessed what Hoffman's suffering must be, and left him to the torture of the flagellations certain to be laid upon him by his own strong, better nature.

Three months had passed, and the torture of the second divorce trial had been stolidly endured, before the lawyer, who had practically lived in New York City during the period of litigation, left town for a brief period, and, returning, advised his friend to do likewise.

"You've had too much of New York City, Fred," he urged. "You're not getting any better here, and the doctor says you won't. I'm going to take you to a smaller place—say Stillfield. You would be better off in Belleville, but——"

"Oh, I couldn't, Alston!" The man seemed singularly broken as he made this protest.

"No, I suppose you couldn't . . . but, wouldn't you be glad to see the youngsters, though? Harry and Beatrice——"

It seemed like needless cruelty, and Hoffman winced before it. "Don't, Alston! God, you know how much I'd like to see them! But——"

"Yes; I suppose so." Alston seemed to be far less considerate to-day than usual. "But you'll never get quite well in New York City. The associations——"

"Alston, this town is a vast purgatory to me! It's terrible to sit here, idle, with nothing in the world to do but think . . . think . . . think of——"

"I know, Fred. Well, I've arranged to have you go to Stillfield if you care to. It's a town not unlike Belleville. And——"

"I know Stillfield. I'd go crazy there."

"Well, you'll go crazy in New York. You're not picking up, Fred, although the doctor says you're physically fit again. Now, there at Stillfield—why, it's close by Belleville, don't you see? And perhaps you might do something there to help along things at the factory. It would not be too far for, say, Valentine, to go to see you, now and then, and get the benefit of your advice. I don't suppose you'd care to have your son——"

"Care to have him! Alston! With what bitterness I've yearned to have a glimpse of Harry, Beatrice, and——"

"Don't say Anna, Fred. Surely you would not care for a sight of Anna!"

"No, because the scorn with which her eyes would fill at sight of me would be far more than I could bear. But——"

A light of triumph for an instant flashed in the lawyer's usually mild blue eyes, but he very quickly quenched it.

"I don't believe she'd look at you with scorn, Fred; but that's neither here nor there. I'm not asking you to go to Belleville. Stillfield is the place. You can rest up there, spend a lot of time out-doors, consult with Valentine, and get your mind in healthier shape. You're——"

"I know. You think I'm worrying. That's not the word, old man. I'm hating myself into the grave. I know it. I *am* well, physically, although I totter, still, upon my feet when I walk half a block. But, oh, my soul is sick! Sick with disgust at what I've done, old man! Sick . . . sick . . . sick with a black disgust!"

"Well, Stillfield will do you good."

There was little of the old, self-reliant Hoffman in the man who said, submissively, in answer: "All right, Alston. Do what you think best."

It was early on a winter evening when they reached the quiet village, smaller, more diffuse than Belleville, and Alston took his weary and weak friend to the hotel. "Rest up here, a little while, Fred," he suggested. "I'm not asking you to live in such a place, remember. I've got a place picked out for you. While you're resting I shall go and make things ready for you. See that everything's all right, you know."

Hoffman nodded, not very deeply interested. He did not even send his dull eyes round the dingy sitting-room to which the lawyer had conducted him.

Alston hurried to a quiet house, embowered in trees, at a short distance from the village, directly on

the trolley-line which ran to Belleville, fifteen miles away, and when Beatrice met him at the door, with the statement that old Barbie was engaged upon the basting of a roast, and could not leave the kitchen, he smiled with a serenity unusual even on his calm, good-natured face.

"Well, surely, it's a privilege to have you let me in. I've just come to tell you that my friend came down with me, as I wrote you I half hoped he would, and is now up at the hotel. It's so good of your mother to let me bother you with strangers."

"Oh, Mr. Alston! You know that anything you ask——"

"All right, Beatrice, I understand. How's the picture frame we mended?"

"Come see?" She led him to a portrait of her father, and pointed to a certain part of the old frame. "It's absolutely perfect."

He examined it with care, and then turned triumphantly to her. "What did I tell you? What did I tell you? My cement . . . it will glue anything. I defy you to find any sign that it was ever broken!"

She smiled at him with real affection. He had been their stay through many dark and dismal days. "You were quite right. It's wonderful."

He beamed on her with the fine feeling which soft-hearted bachelors, denied the joy of children of their own, sometimes achieve for those of friends. "It's a specialty of mine—patching up the broken bits . . . of life."

She did not catch the deeper meaning of his words,

but thought he was considering only broken furniture, and broken picture-frames. "Now that we're getting settled we are finding many opportunities for you to show your skill," she laughed. "Moving! Such destruction! If mother had once dreamed how much damage would be done, I don't believe she ever would have left Belleville . . . except——" Her face sobered and her eyes filled.

He caught this instantly. "Now, no sorrow, if you please, young lady!" he insisted. "This is to be a *happy* evening. Do you suppose I came here to mope over . . . well, you know I am a *mender.* I won't think of anything that's broken, life, or bric-à-brac, except to study how best to make repairs."

"Some things——"

"Hush! Cheerful is the word, you know!"

She looked around the room, making a brave effort to shake off her depression. "Everything looks just the same as it did in the old home, back in Belleville, doesn't it?"

"Everything," he smiled. "Except the stove."

"No; we couldn't move the stove. I am sorry it was built into the house. Sometimes it was grouchy, but it was warm-hearted, after all."

"It sounds as if you might be talking about me."

"No, Mr. Repair-man, just the stove." She smiled fondly at him. "I said it was warm-hearted after all. Didn't you hear that? While you——"

"Go on; make fun of me . . . but wait! When I have glued together everything in this house which has been broken you will have to treat me with far

more respect. You'll have to grant that I am master of my trade."

"I do; I do! It's so good of you to take such trouble helping us."

"My dear child, it's nothing to the things you do for me. For instance, who but you and your dear mother would let me bring a sick friend, here, for dinner, without one word of inquiry? I simply call up on the telephone, and you all say 'of course.' No questions asked. That's something, isn't it?"

He watched her somewhat apprehensively, fearful of the questions as to his friend's identity, which he had feared from the beginning, but had managed to avoid by adroit management. But she did not ask them. Since the stranger was a friend of his, then he would be welcome. He sighed with real relief.

"We're only too pleased," she assured him. "We're rather lonely. Harry is so much in Belleville. He can only get here once a week, now. That factory!"

"Buckling down to work like a good fellow, eh? Well, that's good, dear. And Dorothy takes some time, no doubt."

She nodded. "He'll soon be married, and move into our—old home. *Then* we'll be lonely, *really*. You'll only come for little visits."

"I shall come as often as you'll let me."

"That will be very often." She glanced up at the clock. "But your friend is late. Are you sure he'll come?"

"Quite positive. He always keeps his word."

"It's pleasant to see people. We've seen so few since we came here. Yet I was so glad to get away from Belleville! I don't know just how to express it. I felt, oh, so——"

"I know, Beatrice."

"And I am sure the change will do mother a lot of good . . . away from the . . . old surroundings . . . new house . . . new atmosphere . . . new life!" She went to Alston and smiled up at him, very charmingly, but there was pathos in it, too. "It is I, you know, who now look after things."

He beamed at her. "I know you do. And what a splendid little housewife! It's good practice for you, Beatrice. For it will soon be *your* turn."

"My turn? What do you mean?"

"To marry."

She smiled very sadly. "No, Mr. Alston; I'm afraid I've lost . . . my faith."

"Your faith in what, child?"

"Oh, all mankind."

He answered with a very serious face. "You lose faith too easily." He took her hands. "Beatrice, you are very young. There are many things in life which you cannot possibly understand, and therefore should not undertake to judge."

"You mean . . . my father?"

"Yes; for a long time I have meant to speak to you of him."

Her face hardened and she turned her head away. She even tried to draw her hands from his, but he clung to them.

"Beatrice, you have not the right to withdraw your affection from him."

"He has forsaken us," she answered calmly, bitterly.

"I have told you of his desire to see you, but you refused to go to see him."

"Oh, I could not!" She spoke not in anger but in deep and touching sorrow. "I . . . could not meet my father. He seems . . . like a stranger to me. When I came home from the convent and found my mother so unhappy . . . and the home so desolate . . . and then learned why . . . oh, Mr. Alston, can't you think? Father had been the very soul of home, to me; the master of it all; and then——"

He dropped her hands, smiling with an infinite sadness. "I know. And then how different it was!"

She turned her sorrowful young eyes toward a carved chair standing by the table. "When I see his chair . . . always empty . . . it seems as if my heart would break . . . but——" She suddenly burst into tears, and, hiding her face against the lawyer's friendly shoulder, wept as if her heart were, truly, breaking.

"Come, come, dear child. I won't mention the subject again. But we'll let my friend sit in that chair, to-night. I'm sure he will enjoy it. Wait till he comes."

Barbie entered, at the moment—a little thinner, possible a little slower on her feet, but not less birdlike in her manner. She cocked her head at Al-

ston's speech as a canary does who hears a whistle. "What? Who's coming?" she demanded, worried at the thought of any guest for dinner when she had not been warned.

"Just a dear old friend of mine, Barbie."

She was deeply interested. "To stay for dinner?"

"Why, of course," said Beatrice.

"And you must do your best, Miss Barbara," said Alston. "He's a very particular gentleman."

Upon reflection she was reassured. "Well," she said confidently, "my leg o' lamb needn't be ashamed! And I've got some cranberries that came from Belleville." She stood sadly gazing into space. "My, my! Whenever I cook cranberries . . . I think of the old gentleman." Her eyes fell on the chair and filled with tears. "He was so fond of cranberries."

Alston looked with mock reproach at Beatrice, nor did he wish her to suppose that his reproach was wholly counterfeit. "You see, Beatrice? Barbie's heart remains true to her Belleville and the 'old gentleman!' "

"That's so," said Barbie. "For Mrs. Hoffman's sake I'm willing to stay here, if it must be, until the end of my days; but Mr. Alston, when I die, I want to be buried in Belleville." Now she snuffled audibly. "I want to lay there among friends."

He laughed frankly at her. Then, pretending to smell something: "Barbie, somethin's burning!"

It took her mind from other troubles, as he had known it would.

"Great heavens!" she cried, and vanished, crying: "It's my leg o' lamb. My leg o' lamb!"

Alston looked after her and laughed. He had been glad the ancient servant had said what she had about her old employer. He was still smiling when he helped Beatrice complete the setting of the table, himself bearing first a bottle of claret, then a vase of flowers to their places. Alston's heart was warming with the passage of each moment. He had called himself past master of the trade of mending broken things. He had undertaken a great task—the task of mending divers broken lives. Could he succeed with them as he had with picture-frames and vases?

"Flowers on the table," he remarked, as he placed them in position. "That means 'Welcome.' And this claret—the same good old Nineteen-four! Fine! We're going to have a jolly evening, Beatrice."

"A jolly evening?" said the girl. "I've almost forgotten how a jolly evening seems. Not since the old days——"

Laden with extra silver he hurried from the sideboard to the table. "Silver, plenty of it. It gives tone!" he hastily remarked.

"We'll all try to make it pleasant for your friend," said she. "Shall I play for him?"

Alston stopped dead in his tracks. "No," he mused. "Don't play. I don't believe . . . he'd care for it." His mind reverted to Sevigny and the musical days in that New York apartment. "He has been played for . . . enough," he finished with some emphasis and a queer smile.

"Is he so nervous?" Beatrice was plainly disappointed.

"Worse than that," said Alston, taking full ad-

vantage of the opportunity to warn her. "He's almost afraid of people. I wish . . . that when he comes . . . you would receive him . . . first. He'd like that, I am sure."

"Really? How queer! But of course we can arrange it. And when mother comes, why, we'll already be good friends."

"Ah," said Alston, feigning jealousy, "he'll win you away from *me!*"

She shook her head.

"Well, I'll go and get him and bring him here at once. I shall bring him through the garden door. It will save us fifty yards of walking. Remember, you're to meet us, quite alone."

She did not understand exactly, but smiled, humoring this dear old friend.

"And please be very kind and good to him," he added wistfully. "He's the best friend I have."

"Of course, Mr. Alston."

"I shall be back in less than fifteen minutes."

"I'll be watching for you," she assured him as he hurried out.

"Miss Beatrice," said Barbie, entering with bread and sundries, "who do you suppose this friend of Mr. Alston's is? I'll bet it's only Mr. Harry."

"Oh, no; I don't think he's joking . . . quite; but he did seem a little strange. I wonder——"

Harry himself burst in upon them at the moment and caught his sister in his arms as soon as he had dropped a suit-case.

"Oh, Harry! You're back a day ahead of time!"

"Yes; Mr. Alston wired me, asking me to hurry home if it was possible." He turned to Barbie. "Hello, Barbie!"

"Hello, Mr. Harry. How are things in Belleville?" She always asked that question with a wistful little air. She was pitifully homesick.

"The whole village sends regards to you."

"Really? Oh, Mr. Harry, tell me all about it later, won't you? I've got to look after the dinner now. But—one thing. Did you see our dog? The one we gave to Mrs. Stevenson?"

"Prince? Of course." He laughed. "He told me to tell you that he is going to write to you."

"Oh, now," she said reproachfully, "you're making fun of me!"

"Where's mother?" said the laughing youth.

"Upstairs. She's been lying down. She tires so easily!"

"I'm going to find her."

But he did not, for Anna, hearing him, came down just then. "My own big boy!" she cried, and caught him in her arms.

As soon as these delighted greetings ended, Harry, having freed himself of all impediments, looked at the unusually elaborate table. "But you are all fixed up?"

"Mr. Alston's bringing someone here for dinner."

"Good old Mr. Alston!" He turned to his mother brightly. "Dorothy is coming over, dear, to-morrow. I'm to stay until she comes. Valentine has promised to look after things. And in the afternoon the

Senator is coming with his car to take us in to Buffalo. She wants to do some—shopping." He blushed furiously. He always did when conversation led them toward his coming marriage. "Beatrice, will you go with her? She told me to ask you."

"I'd love to. Harry, did you know that some things from her trousseau are in the window at McCutcheon's? I saw them there. Magnificent! One wrapper . . . oh, what laces!"

Anna looked at him and smiled. "I'm glad you are so happy, Harry."

"Mother, dear, I'm *very* happy!"

She sighed, and sighing, smiled. "At last . . . some joy again!"

"Mother," said Harry very soberly, "I'm going to tell you. I'd thought perhaps I wouldn't. But . . . I received a letter at the works a week or two ago from . . . father. He sent me congratulations and his . . . blessing, mother."

"Where was he . . . Harry?" Anna's voice was faint and tremulous.

"Still ill in the sanitarium."

Anna shrank involuntarily, but tried to hold her self-control.

"Mother, dear," the boy continued carefully, "did you know that for a time his life was really despaired of? Mr. Alston told me of it. He has . . . gone through a good deal."

"Why," said Beatrice, alarmed, "he never told me that! And we were talking, too, about his sickness. But that he——"

"Where is Mr. Alston?" Anna asked. "I thought I heard his voice here."

"Don't you remember? He's bringing someone here to dine with us. He's gone to get him at the train, or the hotel. He'll be back before long, dear."

"Then I've got to make myself presentable," said Harry. "Come on, mother." He caught her arm. "Come talk to me while I shave and things."

"I'll bring the suit-case, Harry," Beatrice declared, and, although he tried to take it from her, held it behind her and insisted. He yielded and they disappeared together.

A moment later Alston entered softly, almost furtively, and after an instant's hesitation, sure that all was clear, hurried back to the side door and ushered Frederick Hoffman in. The "mender" was at work upon an effort more important than any broken picture-frame had ever called for.

CHAPTER XVI

Careful to make little noise and quite as careful to conceal from him who followed him that he was exercising care, the lawyer turned back when he found the room was empty, and led in from the door a bent and broken man, upon whose face the marks of long and wasting illness were apparent, in whose feeble step the tale of weary weakness was very plainly told.

"Come right in, Fred," Alston urged, after making certain that the lights were low.

"Alston, are you sure it's right for you to bring me, worn out, half sick as I am, to visit strangers? Of course, it's kind, but——"

"Of course it's all right, Fred." Alston led him to the fireplace and took his coat and hat, meanwhile glancing about the room, and as he crossed it to lay the garments down, turning the gas above the table still a little lower. He did not wish to have the situation burst too suddenly upon the sick man. "They're dear friends of mine. I'm quite at home here, and—I hope you'll soon be the same."

"But this is their dining-room! Their table is all set for dinner!"

"The side door was easier. I often use it. High steps at the front. That's why I brought you right

in here. And they are *expecting* us for dinner. I told them we would dine with them. And, Fred, they've got a cook here—well! Just like Barbie, Fred!"

The situation worried Hoffman. He had been so long in solitude, the prey of his remorse, the victim of emotion, that he dreaded meeting anyone. To be thrust thus intimately into a strange family circle shocked him. He suspected nothing of the plot the lawyer had been planning, but the situation worried him.

"Alston, I'm not well enough. I didn't understand you, quite. I had no idea . . . if you want to introduce me to your friends, why, well and good. I shall be glad to meet them. But to intrude at dinner, shaken as I am——

"Alston, after you have introduced me, you must let me go away. They'll know me then and can invite me for another time if they still wish to. To-morrow . . . we must drive to Belleville in a closed carriage. No one must know that I am there . . . but I want to see the old place once again. And then I'll go away somewhere. Alston, it makes me very nervous to be even here in this part of the state. I——"

"Nonsense, Fred. You're to dine here, spend the evening here. You've moped enough. My friends are yours, you know. You'll like them. A little change will do you good. It's been a long time, Fred, since you've seen the inside of a real home."

"God! How long!" The weak and weary man

raised both his hands in a despairing gesture. "It seems like a horrible dream, old man!"

Alston nodded. "It's been bitter, but——"

"What could I have done without you, Alston? You've taught me what a true friend can be!"

"Good! I've tried to. This is part of it. Cheer up! I want you to be happy here to-night. Doesn't it all breathe of peace and rest."

"Yes, yes; and I need rest."

"Isn't it comfortable and homelike?" He turned up the gas a little. "Come, Fred—look around you."

As he did so Alston slowly turned the light full on. Frederick Hoffman looked about the room, and then weakly caught a chair-back, steadying himself. He saw the old, familiar silver on the table, the very chair on which he leaned had been, for years, his chair at his own table. His frightened eyes swept to the pictures on the wall.

"I . . . she," he stammered, "and the . . . children! *Alston, where am I?"*

"At . . . home," said Alston softly, and caught his arm and held him as he clung to his old chair.

"My . . . old chair!" said Hoffman brokenly, stroking its carved back as if it might have been a human face.

"Yes; it's your old chair . . . where you belong, Fred."

"Alston, my dear friend, you did——"

"I did it rather nicely, eh?" said Alston,

trying to laugh, but having trouble with insistent tears.

Hoffman pulled himself together tremulously. "You meant well, old man, but it can't be!"

"Don't be foolish, Fred. Why not?"

"I should die . . . of shame!"

"No, Fred; there's nothing shameful in setting a wrong right."

"I could never ask her to forgive."

"Fred, Anna has suffered, but I've never heard her speak one word of bitterness nor of reproach of you. I'm sure that when she prays at night she always mentions . . . you."

The man was deeply moved. "It is the glory of womanhood," said he, "that no matter how sinful a man's life may have been, there is always some good woman like—like Anna to lift her voice in prayer for him. But her wounds must be too deep to heal. Alston, it cannot be. I cannot stay." He started toward the door.

Beatrice, remembering her promise to the lawyer, came hurrying down from Harry's room, where gossip of the coming wedding had almost made her forget. Alston heard her laugh upon the stairs.

"Wait, Fred! Your daughter!"

The man's steps were halted. He stood as if entranced. Now he longed to see his daughter! "Beatrice!"

"She doesn't know you're here. Don't you want to see her, even if she doesn't know it and you go at once?"

"Oh, how I want to!"

"Then, if you won't stay, at least slip there behind the portières at the door and have a glimpse of her. Fred, it will warm your heart. Quick!" He hid him.

"Alone?" said Beatrice, entering and seeing only Alston.

"Well——"

"But where's your friend? Our guest?"

"I think he'll soon be here."

"I'm so glad." The girl's smile was very sweet as the hungry eyes of the concealed man watched it. "Poor man! He has been ill. It makes me eager to see him. Queer, isn't it, how women love to have someone around for them to fuss over."

"Don't worry, Beatrice; there will be plenty to fuss over—soon!"

"Mother's like that, too," the girl went on reflectively.

"Of course. She became accustomed to it . . . with your father."

She nodded sadly. "Did you know Harry had got home? He came while you were gone. It seems so good to see him? He is away so much."

"Splendid! Then we'll all be here together, just as we used to be in Belleville."

She sighed. "Yes . . . all . . . except my father. Tell me, has he been so very ill?"

"Yes, very."

"And we did not know it! And now, is he——"

"Now he is slowly recovering."

"Ah, I am so glad! Mr. Alston, I thank God for that!"

Alston took the girl's white hands. He wondered if he might not use the mood which she was in as a medium through which to carry courage to the sick and sorry soul behind the curtain.

"Beatrice, do you remember when your father was so ill years ago? You were a little girl then, but every evening you prayed for him. It was such a sweet little prayer! I wonder if you still remember it!"

"A prayer?"

"Yes, two little lines. How he used to love to hear you say them. Can't you remember?"

"Ah, yes! 'Almighty God, I pray to Thee, Make my papa well for me!' Is that the prayer you mean?"

It was too much for Frederick Hoffman. His self-control could hold him in concealment not an instant longer. He strode forward, very weakly, with his hands stretched toward her.

"Father! Oh, my father!" the girl cried.

"Beatrice! My own sweet girl!"

Alston turned away.

"My poor father!" said the much affected girl. She looked up at his face. "But how white your hair is! And your dear face—oh, father!"

"My dear daughter!" Frederick Hoffman's voice was full of tears.

"And just think of it! Barbie, your old Barbie—she's still with us. And how glad she will be!" The excited girl could not think consecutively; she was in

a flutter of delight, of sympathy, or nervousness. She showed him the picture frame which Alston had repaired. "You can't notice it, can you?"

She was fighting, as she talked with desperate inconsequentiality, for far more than her own self-control. She could see her father tremble. Her father, whom she had believed to be the strongest of all men, her father whom she had begun to think was heartless, her father who had gone away from them, was on the verge of tears.

Distraught, she took a flower from the bouquet on the table and slipped its stem through one of his lapel buttonholes. But she could not save him from the breakdown which she had known was coming. The tears were rolling down his cheeks.

"Father . . . please don't!" she said softly. "Father, dear, I love you with my whole heart!"

With a tremendous effort he fought back his emotion. "My child, I have prayed to die, but now I thank God that He let me live to hold you in my arms, to hear you tell me that you still love me." He took her flower-like face between his hands and held it thus, looking earnestly at it. "How like your mother when I first knew her! May you *be* like her, my child! It is the best wish I can have for you."

Alston had slipped away, found Anna and now led her, wondering, into the dining-room. Beatrice caught sight of her before her mother saw who really was there. With a protective gesture which quite overwhelmed the miserable man, she threw her arm

across her father's breast as if to fend all criticism from him.

When Anna saw who waited, she staggered back a step or two, and then, steadied by a hand upon the sideboard and the other stretched unconsciously to Alston, she stood gazing, startled, speechless.

"Mother . . . please!" begged Beatrice. She went to her and pleaded with imploring eyes. "Please!"

Anna did not look at her, but made a gesture, reassuring her, and on her face a faint, sweet smile appeared.

"Come, Beatrice," said Alston, and led the girl away.

Frederick Hoffman stood at first with a bowed head, finding strength to give the mother of his children one glance only. Then, as she did not speak, he turned as if to go, as if accepting his dismissal.

"Fred!" said she, arresting him.

He stopped and turned toward her, but could not lift his eyes to meet her gaze. When he spoke his voice was tremulous; his attitude showed the sad weakness of his emaciated frame.

"Anna," he said slowly, "I had no idea when I came here . . . no idea. Alston did all this . . . with good intentions, of course, but . . . Anna, I don't know whether you could——"

He stood there trembling, his lips quivering, unable to say more, but she made no sign and gradually he gathered strength again.

"Anna," he said slowly, "you see me now, before

you, in the saddest moment of my life. I never should have come, but Alston . . . still, now that I am here, I want to say to you one thing . . . perhaps the last that I shall ever say to you. Great is the wrong that I have done you, Anna, but great has been my punishment. Endless hours of deep remorse and shame have tortured me. I . . . ah, as I forsook you, Anna, so has God forsaken me! . . . That is all that I can say to you. . . . Good-by!"

A second more she stood there speechless, motionless, but as he slowly turned to go she stepped toward him and took his hand.

"Fred, don't go. We still have something we can live for—our dear children. Let us try to help them find the happiness which we, ourselves, have searched for and have missed. Perhaps a ray of it will fall then on the evening of our lives."

The stricken man advanced and slowly raised her white hand to his lips and kissed it. As he tried to straighten afterward he tottered, and, had she not caught him, would have fallen. It was the arm of Anna, the deserted wife, that gave him strength to reach his old armchair.

For an instant she stood looking at him with an infinite compassion. Then, going to the door, she called to Beatrice.

The young folk rushed in together and the four members of the family thus stood reunited.

Alston, smiling, went to the kitchen door. "Barbie," he cried, "bring on your leg of lamb."

"Yes, sir," she answered promptly.

"I deserve my dinner," he said gravely.

She came in with a salver piled with smoking dishes. "And you're going to have it, Mr. Alston."

Then she saw who sat there at the table, and without a word, without even looking at him, thrust the heavy-laden tray into the lawyer's startled hands.

"It's Mr. Hoffman!" The old servant's voice was a mere wavering cry. *"It's the old gentleman!* Oh, Mr. Hoffman! Mr. Hoffman!" She fell kneeling at his feet.

Harry was the last to enter. "Father! Father!" he cried joyfully.

"My boy!" said Frederick Hoffman as the tears, unheeded, rolled down his flushed and sunken cheeks.

THE END

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